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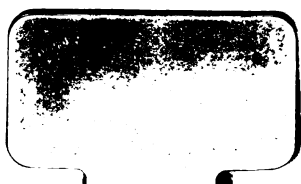
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TOM;

OR,

A Woman's Work for Jesus.

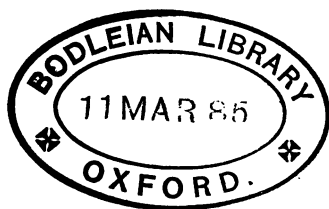
LONDON:

T. WOOLMER, 2, CASTLE STREET, CITY ROAD, E.C. ;

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1885.

1489. f. 261.



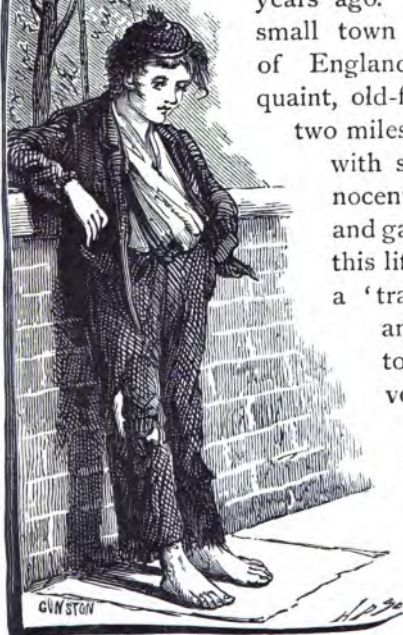
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CHAPTER. I.

MRS. BRIGGS AND HER ERRAND BOY.



LITTLE Mrs. Briggs was a widow.

She was of middle age, and, at the time of our story, lived by herself, as she had done ever since the death of her husband, which had taken place some ten years ago. She resided in a small town in the central part of England — a pretty, little, quaint, old-fashioned rural town,

two miles from a railway, and with streets which were innocent alike of pavement and gas. Yet, small as was this little town, it possessed a 'trade.' It was one of an interesting group of towns and villages devoted to manufacturing, from straw, hats and bonnets of every imaginable shape, size, and kind, for men and women, boys and girls.

This industry

furnished employment of one kind or another for most 'of the women in the place, old, middle-aged, and young, but chiefly the last. These spent their time in alternately fabricating straw hats and bonnets, and converting the straw itself into the plait of which the hats and bonnets were made ; a clean, light, and useful employment, dear reader, but not a very remunerative one.

While what was called the 'sewing season' lasted—that is to say, during the first four or five months of the year, when the women were employed in making up the plait, with needle and thread, into hats and bonnets—the wages they could earn were fairly good. This was their *harvest time* ; and, by dint of great diligence and the utmost economy, they could procure sufficient money during these few months to keep them in tolerable comfort for the time, and enable them to lay by a little against the days when the remunerative 'sewing season' would be over. But to those who were not careful during the 'sewing season' the remainder of the year brought little save starvation. It was pleasant, no doubt, on bright summer days, to see, at the cottage doors, the little groups of girls and women busy with their plaiting, and deeply interesting to watch the slender and shining

strips of straw glancing quickly in their nimble fingers, which sometimes vainly strove to keep pace with their still more nimble tongues ; or to meet the plaiters by twos and threes in the fields and lanes, still busy as they walked with their light and cleanly work. But it detracted not a little from the pleasure afforded by these sights to know that, though the poor creatures worked their fingers to the bone, they could scarcely, at the utmost, earn more than enough to buy the bread they needed for the day.

The straw trade supplied the little town with several other branches of industry beside the 'plaiting' and the 'sewing.' From the time when it leaves the threshing machine until it is exhibited for sale in the shape of a clean, cool hat or bonnet in the milliner's shop window, there are many processes through which the straw must pass. It must be manipulated by several pairs of hands, before it is ready even for the plaiters. First of all, the faulty and useless straws must be weeded out. Then come the cutting, sorting, and splitting of those straws which are considered fit for use. These and other operations furnish employment for great numbers of both men and women. And, in addition to all this, the selling of the

prepared straws to the plaiters, and the buying from them of the plait when it is made, form a distinct branch of the trade.

It was by means of this last-named department of the straw business that Mrs. Briggs obtained her livelihood. She sold straws to the plaiters, and then bought their plait. This she kept stored in bundles in closets and cupboards, upon tables and chairs, on the floor, and in every available nook and corner in the room in which she lived, which was, with the exception of a small back-kitchen, the only down-stairs room she had. And of these bundles she disposed, as she had opportunity, to the various manufacturers of hats and bonnets in her own and the neighbouring towns, making weekly pilgrimages to several markets for the purpose. Mrs. Briggs, as is the case with most small women, was a busy, bustling little body, and managed to live very comfortably upon the modest profits of her business.

But she was ill at ease. With her temporal lot she was quite satisfied. She was devoutly thankful to God for the prosperity and comfort which, so contrary to her fears, she had enjoyed since that dark day, when, returning from the open grave of her husband, she had shrunk with so much dread from the

terrible prospect of the future. Since that day she had learnt to rely upon Him Who is the 'Husband of the widow,' and truly such He had been to her. But, while the good little woman was more than contented with her earthly lot, she was deeply dissatisfied with herself. It seemed to her that she was doing nothing in return for her Saviour's love. She was the prey of a morbid fear that the world would be little or no better for her life. She overlooked the fact that, in quietly performing the duties of the position in which God had placed her, she was rendering Him acceptable service. It did not occur to her that the world is undoubtedly the better for the life of every honest and industrious man and woman who lives in it ; and that her Christian example would almost certainly be the means of effecting greater good than would ever come to her knowledge in this world. As is frequently the case with pious and conscientious people, little Mrs. Briggs undervalued herself, and was daily oppressed with the conviction that she was living a very useless and ungrateful life. This was, as we have seen, a mistake ; but the zealous spirit out of which it grew led to the doing of a great good.

For the worthy little woman did not give

herself up to fruitless self-reproaches. On the contrary, she daily asked herself what she could do for Christ. Thinking that she had done nothing as yet for her Saviour, she hoped and prayed that, if there were anything she could do to assist His cause and express her gratitude for His great love—anything which He would think worthy of acceptance—He would show her what it was. Nor was it long before her prayer was answered. Her eyes were one day opened to see an opportunity of doing work for God, which she wondered, since it had been ready to her hand for some weeks past, that she had not seen before.

We have said that the temporal circumstances of Mrs. Briggs were in a comfortable, not to say thriving, condition. In fact, her business had of late become so prosperous that she had been compelled to engage an errand boy. This boy, who was, as nearly as she could ascertain, about twelve years of age, had been in her service about a month or six weeks. His name was Tom Stokes; and surely such another Tom Stokes as he never was seen before or since. In lieu of clothes, sundry rags and tatters, tied together here and there with bits of coarse string, were hung upon his hungry frame. Through

many a gaping rent the keen wind found its way to his shivering limbs. Shoes and stockings he had none. His dark face would have been handsome but for its hollow cheeks and the wolfish expression of his bright black eyes. His black hair hung about his head in short, stiff tufts, drooping over into his eyes, and thrusting itself up in a most surprising manner through numerous holes in his ragged, shapeless, and dirty cap.

Such, on the day when he entered the service of Mrs. Briggs, was Tom Stokes, as he appeared to the outward eye ; and he was as dark within, as he was ragged and dirty without. It was said there was not a more ignorant or wicked lad in all the town. Tom's parents had by some means escaped the necessity of sending him to school. The consequence was, he had learned scarcely anything that was good. He could not read, did not even know his letters ; and, worst of all, was utterly ignorant of God. He was, in fact, a little heathen living in a Christian country.

Ignorance and vice are often found in company. Terrible twin sisters, they stalk together through the land. Accordingly, Tom Stokes, ignorant of everything good, was a proficient in all that was bad. He was

an adept at lying, swearing, stealing, and a ringleader of the boys of his own age in all kinds of mischief. He had already been in prison once, for robbing the parson's orchard; and there seemed little prospect for him except a life of crime, and, not improbably, a felon's death. Nor will this appear strange when we add that the parents of the poor benighted lad were amongst the most abandoned characters in the place. His father was an idle, drinking, poaching, thieving blackguard, who spent more of his time in gaol than anywhere else; and his mother was but little better than her wretched husband. The child of such parents, and brought up with such training as they would be sure to give him, the wonder would have been, if poor Tom had begun the journey of life in any other paths than those of vice.

It was in this dark and neglected creature, this poor Tom Stokes, that little Mrs. Briggs was led one day to see the opportunity for which she had prayed so long. Here, surely, was work which she might do for her Saviour.

But Mrs. Briggs had not only been led to see, in poor, neglected Tom Stokes, the opportunity she had long desired of doing

work for Jesus ; she had also, without knowing it, already begun to do that work.

We have described the poor outcast as he appeared when Mrs. Briggs resolved, in her compassion, to take him as her errand boy. But he was no longer altogether such as when his forlorn appearance had first excited the pity of her tender heart. Under the manipulation of her motherly hand his outward *boy* had already undergone a material change. Before permitting him to enter upon the duties of his situation, she had conducted the dirty, ragged lad into her sweet little whitewashed back-kitchen, and there subjected him to a cleansing process, to the like of which he had hitherto been an entire stranger. She had applied soap and water till his face shone with an unwonted lustre, and the brown hue of his hands could no longer be attributed in any degree to dirt. Then she had undertaken his head, which she first subjected to a similar process to that which she had applied to his face, and then combed out his knotted locks. This last was, as may well be supposed, the most difficult part of her self-inflicted task. Imagine, dear reader, a matted mass of hair, through which no comb had passed for no one could tell how many long months. The

process of combing out this tangled heap made, as may be supposed, enormous demands on the stock of patience possessed by little Mrs. Briggs, and the more so from the fact that Tom, finding the operation even less pleasant than did Mrs. Briggs herself, behaved like the little savage he was, and resisted with kicks and scratches the efforts of his benefactress to arrange his unkempt locks. In spite of all, however, the operation was successfully performed at last; and so great was the change which had been produced, that, when Mrs. Briggs showed Tom his own face in a little square looking-glass which hung against the wall, he stared as though at some one he had never seen before.

In performing these troublesome operations Mrs. Briggs had been actuated partly by a not unbecoming pride. Her errand boy must at least have clean hands and face. But she had also felt from the first a sincere desire to benefit the lad. And now, under the influence of the new motive concerning him which had taken possession of her mind, that desire was not a little strengthened. At first she had pitied the poor lad solely, as she thought, for his own sake. But now she had begun to love and pity him for the sake of

Christ. Her Lord had shown her that this poor, forlorn Tom Stokes was one of His 'little ones.' In the person of the wretched outcast boy whom she was befriending she saw Jesus Himself, poor, neglected, miserable. And she felt a new, strange joy, as she thought of the many ways in which, by helping this poor child of ignorance and crime to grow up out of his present wretched life and become a good man, she might show her gratitude to the Saviour to Whom she owed so much.

Under the influence of such thoughts and feelings, Mrs. Briggs now set herself to attempt a complete reformation, both inward and outward, in poor Tom Stokes. But first she knelt down in secret, and asked her heavenly Father to give her, for the sake of His Son, the help of the Holy Spirit, that she might have wisdom and patience amidst the many difficulties which, she foresaw, would be involved in her task. Then, with renewed earnestness, she set to work.

She began with poor Tom's forlorn exterior. Already, under her vigorous hand, his hands and face had lost the coating of dirt which had so long concealed the natural colour of his skin. But he was still clothed in rags. Now, therefore, without delay, he

must be re-clothed. This was soon accomplished. That very afternoon little Mrs. Briggs paid a visit to a neighbouring clothier's ; and, before Tom went home that evening, he was called into her sitting-room to try on a brand-new suit of clothes. Tom's delight was beyond all bounds. But the trying on of the clothes, which took place in the presence of his benefactress, revealed to her the fact that his shirt was in a state of even greater dilapidation than was the case with his outer garments. Indeed, that which the poor outcast called his 'shirt' was little more than a strip or two of very dirty and flimsy calico, which hung together by means of a few uniting shreds. Regarding with much horror this pitiable rag, Mrs. Briggs told Tom to take it off with great care, before he equipped himself in his new garments, and leave it behind, when he went home, for her to wash and mend.

Another shocking fact was also brought to light by the trying on of the new garments. This was that the hands and face of poor Tom were not the only parts of his skin from which the application of soap and water had been withheld. This entailed upon Mrs. Briggs the performance of another unpleasant task. But the good little woman did not

shrink. Before Tom was finally equipped in his new suit, she conducted him into her little back kitchen, and there gave him, in a large wash-tub, such a swilling and scrubbing as it is safe to affirm he had never experienced before. Tom submitted with a tolerable grace ; and, though he did cry out once or twice, and try to push the little woman away, when the soap got into his eyes, and even struck her with his fist, the very necessary operation of cleansing his long unwashed skin was performed without much difficulty. And when the ordeal was over, and little Mrs. Briggs was rubbing him dry with a rough towel, the poor lad, beginning already to be conscious of the benefit he had received, exclaimed, 'Lor, mum, I does feel nice.'

It was the work of but a few moments to equip Tom in his new clothes. And now, who would have thought that this resplendent boy had no shirt upon his back ? I doubt whether Tom himself was sensible of the shocking fact. He had by this time quite lost what little self-possession had not fled from him at his first sight of those wonderful garments ; and, at least, it was clearly no source of grief to him that his back was innocent of a shirt. He was too much delighted with his new outer garments to

be troubled by so trifling a circumstance as that there was nothing underneath them but his skin. Words utterly failed him, indeed, in the excess of his joy; and he quickly exhausted the language of pantomime in giving expression to his wild delight.

He moreover resorted to sundry impromptu expedients for the purpose of assuring himself that his good fortune was real, and that he was actually dressed in a new suit of clothes. That there might be no mistake as to the reality of his jacket, he stretched out first one arm and then the other, and rubbed his fingers down the sleeves; and then, drawing the jacket tightly around him, he almost wrung his neck in trying to look over his shoulder at its back. In order that he might become fully sensible of his trousers, he brought his hands down again and again, with sounding slaps, upon his thighs. He stamped up and down the brick floor of Mrs. Briggs's little kitchen, that he might be more proudly conscious of his boots. And, finally, coming to a stand, he dropped his hands by his sides, threw back his head, and, opening wide his mouth, laughed out his unspeakable gratitude in such a burst of boisterous merriment, that his little benefactress began to think her simple act of kindness had

disturbed the balance of the poor boy's mind.

At length, however, Tom's exuberant joy subsided, and he took his leave for the night. When he was gone, Mrs. Briggs turned her attention to the shirt, which was lying on the floor where he had dropped it on taking it off. That it needed mending there could be no doubt. But was it worth while to undertake the task? Before deciding this question, the shirt must be washed. But this threatened, from the outset, to be a work of great difficulty. The dilapidated garment required much more delicate handling than was consistent with the idea which brisk little Mrs. Briggs entertained of a thorough washing. However, she would make an attempt. So, having completed the necessary preparations, she plunged the shirt into the water, and, with soap in hand, she set to work. But, at almost the first rub, the flimsy thing began to come to pieces in her fingers; and it became evident that, before the process of washing was finished, the various rags of which Tom's 'shirt' was composed would have parted company, and it would have lost what faint resemblance to a shirt it still retained. She accordingly relinquished her attempt, and sat down to think.

It was not long before there occurred to her mind an expedient which it cost her some effort to entertain. She *did* entertain it, however, and at length determined to carry it out. Having fully made up her mind, she rose from her seat and went upstairs. In her bedroom there stood an old-fashioned chest of drawers. Approaching these, she drew one of them out. It was full of garments. A sacred drawer it was to little Mrs. Briggs. Many a tear had fallen from her eyes upon those neatly folded clothes. They had belonged to her dead husband, and were amongst her most precious treasures. She had thought in the morning that one of her husband's coats would make a suit of clothes for poor Tom. But the thought had been dismissed as soon as it entered her mind; for she had not been able then to persuade herself to cut up anything that *he* had worn. But she had already begun to take a different view of the matter. There was One Whose claims upon her loving gratitude were stronger than even the memory of her dead husband. Those claims had been appealing to her very powerfully all day; and she felt that she could now make cheerfully, for the sake of Christ, the sacrifice which she had thought

to be impossible a few hours ago. Full of such thoughts, she turned over, one by one, the garments in the drawer. From amongst them she selected one, and, closing the drawer, came down-stairs carrying in her hand a clean white shirt.

Far into the night the earnest little woman plied scissors and needle. 'For Christ's sake,' she murmured to herself again and again. And was she not right in thinking also that the precious garment would form a worthier memorial of her departed husband upon the back of poor Tom Stokes, than when it lay uselessly in the drawer upstairs?

As for Tom himself, his new shirt, when he saw it in the morning, and was told to put it on forthwith, added the crowning point to his bliss.



CHAPTER. II.



TOM'S NEW CLOTHES.

UT it was not to be all plain sailing with little Mrs. Briggs.

She was soon to find that the work

of renovating even the

outward *boy* of poor Tom was

by no means an easy task.

When Tom reached home on the evening on which he was first equipped in his new clothes, he created, as may well be supposed, no small stir in the family circle. Tom's *home* was situated in what was called Pincher's Court, a squalid little yard, to which entrance was obtained through a dingy passage, leading out of a narrow, dirty street known by the unprepossessing designation of Fiends' Lane. It

was summer time, and, as it was not yet dusk, Tom became at once, on entering the yard, a centre of attraction to the boys and girls who were at play. There were not many of them, but he found them quite numerous enough. At first they did not recognise him, so thoroughly was he altered. But this was only for a moment. They soon saw who he was, and gathered around him with a wild shout of welcome. Tom Stokes in a new suit of clothes! It was an opportunity too good to be lost. Many were the bantering questions, and sarcastic criticisms on his appearance, with which Tom was assailed. No wounded or speckled bird was ever so set upon by its fellow birds as poor Tom Stokes, in his new clothes, by his old companions. Some pinched him, some plucked his garments, some threw dust upon him, and, if he had not beaten a hasty retreat into his father's house, it would have gone hardly with his new clothes, and he himself would not have come off scot-free.

Tom's appearance caused a sensation in the home circle almost as great as it had created in the yard outside. His father was in prison just now, but he found his mother at home, and his brother and two sisters followed him in from their play in the yard.

For a few moments these members of the family circle regarded the renovated boy with mute and open-mouthed astonishment. When they recovered their self-possession, they overwhelmed him with questions as to how he had obtained his new clothes. His mother gave it as her opinion that he wasn't 'fit to wear such clothes as them 'ere;' they were 'too good for the likes o' he;' but his sisters and brother danced around him in uncontrolled delight.

The next evening, on his return home, Tom approached Pincher's Court with caution. Creeping on tip-toe down the passage, he reconnoitred to see that the coast was clear; and then, perceiving that there was no one in sight, he scudded quickly across the court, and, gaining the door of his father's house, burst breathlessly in.

He was saluted by a gruff and angry voice :—

'Now then, yer young varmint, where are yer a-coming to?'

The voice was one that he knew too well. It was that of his father, who had that day been discharged from prison, and was now lying lazily upon a rough wooden settle underneath the window.

'It's on'y me, father,' said Tom, retreating

into a corner ; for, with all his wild daring, the boy was afraid of his brutal father.

‘ Why, if it bea’n’t our Tom ! ’ said the father, raising himself upon his elbow. And then he added, in a softened tone, ‘ Come here, Tom. Wherever did yer get them ’ere nice new clothes ? ’

Tom approached reluctantly, and submitted his clothes to his father’s inspection.

Since Tom’s father had been to prison, he had not had any beer. Beer was a beverage which he regarded as a necessity of his life. Now, therefore, that he was restored to liberty, some means must be devised of procuring a quantity of that much - craved - for drink. Tom’s father was feeling very thirsty to-night, and his thirst deepened his interest in the new suit of clothes in which his son had so unexpectedly made his appearance. If the reader does not at once see the connection between the thirst of Tom’s father and Tom’s new clothes, it is only necessary for him to exercise a little patience, and all will be made plain.

Tom’s father stroked with a good deal of affection the new jacket which covered his son’s back, and took the cloth of the trousers with which the youthful legs were encased lovingly between his finger and thumb.

'A rare jacket, this, Tom!' he said. 'Beautiful cloth, these breeches! They're worth a sight o' money. Where did yer get 'em from, now? yer ain't told me yet. Yer didn't prig 'em, did yer, yer young dog?' And Tom's father chuckled.

'No, father,' said Tom. And then he told his father how he had come by the clothes.

'Wery kind of her, I'm sure,' said the father, referring to Mrs. Briggs. 'But I say, Tom, these 'ere clothes is too good for the likes o' you.'

'Never you mind, father,' retorted Tom, with unwonted courage; 'I'm a-going to wear 'em.'

'Well, well, boy, you've no call to be awk'ard,' said the father, who had his reasons for wishing not to alarm his son.

It was not long after this before Tom 'went to bed.' This was a very short and easy process with poor Tom Stokes. He simply took off his jacket and shoes, and threw himself down upon what was little other than a heap of straw in one corner of the dirty little room. He did not kneel to pray. He was even ignorant of the meaning of the word. And he fell asleep without a thought of the Great Father Who watches over the evil and

the good, and guards alike the haunt of poverty and the abode of wealth.

When Tom was fairly asleep, his father rose from the settle on which he had been lying, and, cautiously approaching the corner where his son lay, very quietly picked up the jacket and shoes which Tom had just thrown off, and rolled them into a bundle, with the shoes inside. Then, putting the bundle under his arm, he left the cottage. In crossing the court he met his wife, who had been out to dispose of some plait she had lately finished—a very unusual errand with her, for it was but little plait work that she did, or, indeed, work of any kind. Husband and wife regarded one another with a mutual scowl. It was the first time they had met since the husband came out of gaol.

‘You’ve comed home, then?’ said the woman in a sharp tone.

‘Ah,’ was the surly response.

‘What have you got there?’ asked the wife, pointing to the bundle. ‘Why, if it ain’t our Tom’s new jacket!’ she exclaimed.

‘That’s it,’ said the man. ‘And look here!’ So saying, he unrolled the jacket and revealed the shoes which were inside. You know what I’m a-going to do with ‘em?’

'Ay, all right; but mind you get plenty for 'em.'

And, without another word on either side, the miserable couple parted.

The next morning, when Tom awoke, he looked everywhere for his jacket and shoes; and, when he found that they were really gone, he sat down upon his wretched bed, and fairly burst into tears. But he was at no loss to think what had become of his missing clothes.

'It's father, I know it is,' he sobbed to himself; 'he's bin and got money on 'em.'

But Tom did not cry long. He was too much accustomed to his father's cruelty to be affected by it in this instance, except in as far as it had inflicted on him the loss of the clothes of which he had been so proud. So, wiping his tears with his knuckles, he put on his old ragged jacket, and left the house without disturbing his miserable parents, who were sleeping heavily from the effects of the drink they had purchased with the money received from the pawnbroker the night before.

Mrs. Briggs had an unusual number of errands for Tom that day, and was therefore rather vexed when he failed to put in an appearance at the usual time. But, when hour after hour passed, and still he did not come,

her vexation gave way to astonishment and alarm. She found another lad to take Tom's place that day, but was in no small concern as to the welfare of her missing errand boy.

Towards evening her anxiety had become so great that she determined to go in search of him. She would go to the wretched court where he lived, and ask about him at his miserable home. It was not an agreeable expedition, and might be attended with some danger ; but little Mrs. Briggs murmured to herself, as she set forth, the words which had of late been such a source of strength to her spirit. ' For Christ's sake,' she said. ' He "pleased not Himself" for me, and shall I shrink from a little unpleasantness in serving Him ? '

Full of such thoughts, little Mrs. Briggs walked briskly along, and soon reached the entrance to Pincher's Court. Here she paused, and was looking round for some one of whom she might inquire for the house of which she was in search, when she saw, amidst a group of boys who were playing noisily in one corner of the court, the missing Tom himself. Yes, there he was ; but what had become of his new jacket ? And his shoes, too, where were they ? She did not pause to ponder these questions. Mrs. Briggs was a woman of great decision and promptness, which charac-

teristics she now exhibited by walking quickly across the court, and laying her hand on Tom's shoulder before he knew she was near.

Tom started, and looked around with dismay.

'What does this mean, Tom?' asked the little woman kindly.

'Please, mum, it ain't my fault; 'twere father,' was the deprecating reply.

'What do you mean, Tom? What was father?'

'Please, mum, he's bin an' pawned 'em.'

'You should have come and told me at once, Tom,' said Mrs. Briggs gently.

'Please, mum, I durstn't.'

'But you need not have been afraid, my poor boy. It was no fault of yours.'

'No, mum, that it warn't.'

'Is your father at home, Tom?' asked Mrs. Briggs after a pause, during which she had formed a plan and come to a decision.

'No, mum,' said Tom; 'he ain't often at home, he ain't; but mother, she's at home, mum.'

'She'll do just as well. I must go and see her. Which is your house, Tom?'

Tom led the way across the court, and little Mrs. Briggs followed, with all the ragged rout of Tom's late playfellows at her heels.

Tom's mother received Mrs. Briggs with a vacant stare. The interview was short, but to the point. Before it was over, Mrs. Briggs had learned the exact whereabouts of Tom's jacket and shoes, and obtained permission from Tom's mother to take the boy home to live with her. To this arrangement Tom himself had no objection whatever, for his life in his own home had been one of great misery, and he was sensible enough to perceive that he had found in Mrs. Briggs a true friend. Accordingly, having bid good-night to Mrs. Stokes, little Mrs. Briggs turned her back on Pincher's Court, leading by the hand poor Tom, who looked a sufficiently odd companion in his new trousers and ragged coat.

The queerly-assorted pair were followed for some distance by the boys with whom Tom had been playing when Mrs. Briggs arrived in the court, and who seemed to have a vague idea that the good little woman was a police agent in disguise, and the destination of their late playfellow was the lock-up. But, as Mrs. Briggs and her charge turned in the opposite direction from that building of terror, they were reassured, and, after following through two or three streets, returned to their play.

As for Mrs. Briggs, having called at the pawnbroker's and redeemed the lost jacket

and shoes for an exorbitant sum of money, she conducted Tom in safety to her own abode.

As Mrs. Briggs, leading Tom Stokes by the hand, crossed the threshold of her own house that night, she breathed a fervent prayer to God for help in carrying out the labour of love on which she had now fairly entered. 'Lord,' she said within her heart, 'help me to save this poor forsaken boy!' And, in her earnestness, she so tightened her grasp upon Tom's hand that he looked up at her with some surprise.

When they were inside the house, Mrs. Briggs told Tom to take off his ragged jacket and put on again his recovered garments. This he was by no means loath to do. Then, rightly thinking that the poor lad would be hungry, the little woman's next act was to set out some supper for him. This was soon done, and in a few moments Tom was seated at a hearty meal of bread and meat. Mrs. Briggs sat and watched him for some time with a beaming face. She took care that he should have plenty to eat, and invited him to make free with what was set before him.

'Don't be afraid, Tom,' she said; 'this is your home now, you know, and you must look

upon me as your mother.' Tom needed no second invitation, and in a very little time he had made a hearty meal.

It was now a question with little Mrs. Briggs how she should dispose of her young charge for the night. It was evident that this was a matter about which Tom himself was not at all concerned ; for, having eaten of the cold meat and bread until he could eat no more, he now sat back in his chair, drowsily blinking at his benefactress, with an expression similar to that which the face of an alderman may be supposed to wear at the expiration of a city feast. It was evident that, in the supreme satisfaction induced by the abundant meal he had just eaten, Tom was not troubled by any anxiety as to where he should spend the night, or, indeed, in reference to any other subject.

With little Mrs. Briggs it was otherwise. That some sleeping-place should be found for the boy was absolutely necessary. She had a little back room up-stairs where he might sleep by and by, but it could not be made ready for him to-night. The only course, then, seemed to be that she should make up a kind of bed for him on her little chintz-covered couch. With a pillow and a blanket he might spend the night there very well.

She accordingly decided that the couch should be Tom's sleeping-place for that night. This temporary bed was soon arranged, Tom rousing himself from his lethargy, and getting down from his chair to watch the process with deep interest.

'There, Tom,' said Mrs. Briggs, when all was ready; 'that's your bed for to-night. How do you like it?'

'Fust-rate!' said Tom.

'I'm glad you think so. To-morrow night you shall have a proper bed up-stairs.'

'Shall I, though?' exclaimed Tom, with great delight.

'Yes, indeed you shall,' said little Mrs. Briggs, much gratified by the boy's evident pleasure. 'And now, Tom, I'll see you comfortable before I go up; but first you must say your prayers.'

'Wot's them?' asked the poor boy, with expanded eyes.

Mrs. Briggs was inexpressibly shocked. With such ignorance she had never before come in contact, and could not have believed it to exist. And perhaps you, dear reader, are equally amazed, and may be reluctant to believe that there has lived in England, in these days of ours a boy twelve years old

who could need to ask a question such as that of poor Tom Stokes. But your incredulity will vanish if you consider that this poor, forsaken lad had never seen the inside of a place of worship in his life; that he had certainly never heard the voice of prayer with any knowledge of its meaning; and that, though the name of God had frequently been pronounced in his hearing, it was chiefly by lips which uttered it in emphasis of oaths and curses. In view of all this, it is not strange that, in reply to the suggestion that he should 'say his prayers,' this poor, neglected boy should ask, 'Wot's them?'

'Why, don't you know what prayer is, Tom?' asked Mrs. Briggs, in astonishment.

'No, mum, never heered on it.'

'Well, Tom, I'll tell you.' And then the good woman paused, at a loss, for a moment, how to proceed. At length she continued simply, 'Prayer, Tom, is asking God to take care of us and make us good. You know Who God is, Tom?'

'Yes, mum,' said Tom doubtfully; 'that's Him as father swears about, and mother too. They don't ask Him to take care of 'em, though; it's t'other way about; so that ain't prayer.'

'My poor boy!' exclaimed Mrs. Briggs, drawing him to her side. 'How ignorant you are! How I pity you!'

'Thanky, mum,' said Tom.

'Now listen to me, Tom,' continued Mrs. Briggs, scarcely able to repress a smile at the boy's rough simplicity. 'We'll kneel down together, here beside the couch; and I'll pray first, and then teach you a prayer.'

So saying, she led the wondering boy to the side of the couch, and they knelt together—the poor outcast lad and the earnest Christian woman—at the feet of God. And then little Mrs. Briggs lifted up a trembling voice in prayer for the poor heathen lad at her side. Tom himself formed the exclusive subject of her prayer, for she could think of nothing else. She pleaded earnestly that God would teach him the right way, and help him to be good, and to grow up a useful man, and much more to the same loving effect. Tom knelt quietly by her side the whole of the time, because she knelt; but beyond this he gave no token of reverence. On the contrary, his eyes wandered ceaselessly around the room, as though in search of something he could not see. When they rose from their knees, this was explained.

'Where is He, mum?' asked Tom, still looking around.

'Who, Tom?' said Mrs. Briggs.

'God, Him as you prayed to. I don't see Him nowheres. Wot's He like?'

'Why, God is in heaven, Tom; and He's here, and everywhere.'

'Is He, mum? I can't see Him.'

'No, Tom, you can't see Him, because He's a Spirit; but He can see you, and hear you too. But come, kneel down, and I'll teach you to pray to Him as I did just now.'

Tom, wondering more and more, again knelt down beside the couch, and little Mrs. Briggs at his side.

'Now, Tom,' said she, 'you must say what I say.'

'Yes, mum.'

'God bless me.'

'God bless me,' repeated Tom.

'And take care of me through the night.'

Tom, as before, repeated the words without hesitation.

'And forgive my sins,' continued his simple instructress.

'Wot's them, mum?' asked Tom abruptly.

'Sins, Tom,' said little Mrs. Briggs, 'are all the wrong things we've done—telling lies,

swearing, fighting, and such like ; and when we ask God to forgive them, we mean that we want Him not to be angry with us any more. Now say what I said.'

'Yes,' said Tom, going on with his prayer in accordance with the explanation he had just received ; 'and, please, God, don't You be angry with me any more for them lies as I've told, and them bad words, and for that 'ere fight as I had t'other day wi' Bill Henderson.'

'You need not say all that, Tom,' said Mrs. Briggs. 'If you ask God to forgive your sins, that's quite enough just now.'

'Is it, mum? I thought as I'd tell Him what I'd done, so as He'd know what He'd got to forgive.'

'He knows without your telling Him, Tom. He knows everything.'

'Does He, though?' exclaimed Tom. 'Well, I never! There's a man in our court who knows a sight o' things, but he don't know everything.'

'No, Tom,' said Mrs. Briggs, rather shocked, it must be admitted, at Tom's association of ideas ; 'there isn't any man who knows as much as God. He knows everything that takes place, and hears all we say, and can tell what we are thinking

about, too. But come,' she added, 'let us get on with your prayer. Now say, "Help me to be good, and not do wrong any more; for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."'

"Help me to be good, and not do wrong any more," repeated Tom slowly; "for"—Will you say that again, mum?

"For Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

"Jesus Christ," "for Jesus Christ's sake," said Tom, with great deliberation. "Amen." Wot's that, mum? And who's He? who's Jesus Christ?

"Amen," replied Mrs. Briggs, 'is what we always say at the end of our prayers, Tom; and it means that we're in earnest. And Jesus Christ is our Saviour, the Son of God.'

And then, in simple words, the little woman told the poor boy 'the old, old story of Jesus and His love,' to which Tom listened breathlessly and with wondering eyes.

When she had finished, the boy was silent. He was evidently pondering all he had heard.

'And now, Tom,' said she, after a pause, 'it's time to go to bed.'

Tom spoke no more until, when he was comfortably settled on the couch for the night, Mrs. Briggs was about to leave him.

'Good night, Tom,' she said, with her hand on the latch of the door which led up-stairs.

'Good night, mum,' responded Tom ; and then he added in the same breath, 'Will He be here all night, mum ?'

'He? who, Tom ?'

'Why, God, mum—Him as we've bin a-talking about.'

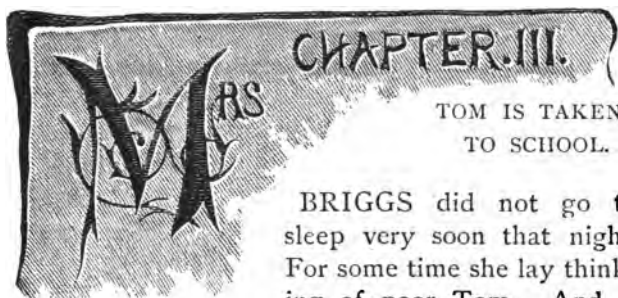
'O yes, Tom, He'll be here all night long, to watch over you and take care of you.'

'Then He won't be wi' you, mum. How'll you do wi'out Him? Or p'raps He'll step up now an' then to see as you're a-getting on all right.'

'No, Tom, God will be with me all night too. Don't you remember I told you He was everywhere?'

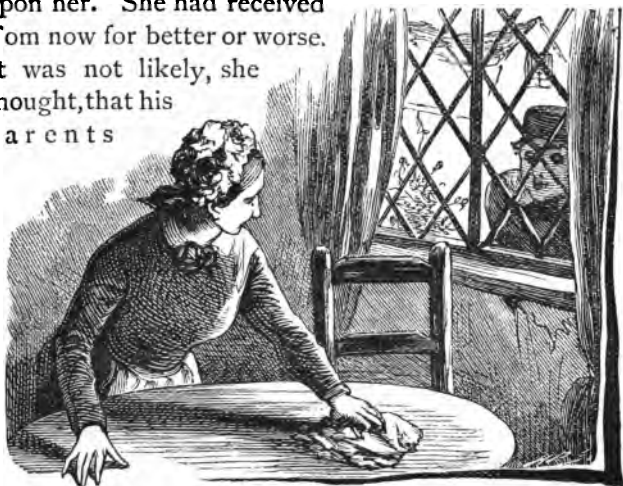
'So you did, mum ; I reck'lect now.'

As Tom was silent after this, Mrs. Briggs shortly left the room, and the tired boy turned his face to the wall, and soon fell asleep.



TOM IS TAKEN
TO SCHOOL.

BRIGGS did not go to sleep very soon that night. For some time she lay thinking of poor Tom. And it was then, in the silence of the night, when she had nothing to do but think, that the full weight of the responsibility she had undertaken began to press upon her. She had received Tom now for better or worse. It was not likely, she thought, that his parents



would demand him back; they would be only too glad to have him taken off their hands. And from this time she would be his mother, and he should be her son.

She felt that she had indeed undertaken a serious charge; and yet it was not without joy that she contemplated the work it would involve. She had never had any children of her own, and already began to feel a mother's love for the poor outcast. And now, what course should she adopt? In what manner could she most effectually benefit poor Tom? By what means was it most likely that, with the blessing of God, she would succeed in reclaiming him from the ignorance and sin in which he had been brought up? As long as he would stay with her he should have a good home, decent clothes, and plenty of wholesome food. She would treat him with the utmost kindness, and would, by Divine help, bear patiently with his faults. But she felt that something more than this was necessary.

The conversation she had had with Tom before leaving him for the night had revealed the fact that he was sadly ignorant, and especially in relation to God and good things. It was clear, therefore, that, in the first place, he must go to school. But could this be

arranged? After a little consideration Mrs. Briggs decided that it could. She had not hitherto employed Tom during the whole of the day. He had usually come to run errands for an hour or so in the morning, and another in the afternoon. And now, if he went to school, she could arrange for him to do all that was necessary out of school hours. It would require some management, and might be inconvenient; but it should be done. What was a little inconvenience when she thought of the love of Christ? She accordingly decided that Tom should go to school the very next day. Having arrived at this decision, her mind was so far relieved that she found no further difficulty in going to sleep.

There were two day schools in the town. One was connected with the Church of England, and the other was associated with the chapel to which Mrs. Briggs belonged. Tom must, as a matter of course, be sent to the latter.

When Mrs. Briggs came down-stairs the next morning at seven o'clock, Tom, probably lulled by the unwonted luxury of his new sleeping-place, was not yet awake. Not wishing to disturb him, the kind little woman moved noiselessly about the room, perform-

ing sundry household duties, including the preparation of breakfast, with a brisk neatness which would have been beautiful to see, had any one been there to see it. Unconscious, however, that there was anything in either her appearance or her conduct that was worthy of admiration, she moved quickly about the room, and backwards and forwards between it and the back kitchen, until, by the time the old Dutch clock, with its solemn 'thud, thud,' had worked its way round to a quarter to eight, the breakfast was laid upon the little round table, and waited only for the boiling of the tardy kettle.

The little woman then proceeded to arouse the sleeping boy. Approaching the couch where he lay, she placed her hand upon his shoulder.

'Now, then, Tom, my boy,' she said, in a cheerful tone, 'wake up! It's breakfast time.'

Tom started, but without opening his eyes, and turned partly over; then, throwing out his arms with a sudden jerk, so that his benefactress narrowly escaped receiving a sharp blow in her face, he muttered in a muffled tone some words which plainly proved that he had not yet returned from dreamland.

'Now then, wot are you a-doin' on? You're

allus a-hittin' of me or some'at. I'll run away, I will.'

Many persons might have been inclined to smile ; but the words and action of the half-awakened boy were so full of sad significance that the tender-hearted little woman could not repress a sigh. To whom had Tom supposed himself to be speaking ? From whom was it that he was accustomed to receive such treatment as to call forth, even in sleep, words like those which had just issued from his lips ? Mrs. Briggs was at no loss to understand what the answer to these questions would be.

But Tom had settled himself down to sleep again. Accordingly she once more placed her hand upon his shoulder, and, giving him this time a vigorous shake, succeeded at last in thoroughly awaking him.

'Good morning, Tom,' said Mrs. Briggs, as he lay for a moment gazing blankly into her face, as though unable to account for his surroundings. 'You are a sound sleeper.'

Tom recollected himself at the sound of her voice. 'Morning, mum,' he said, sitting up. 'I'm glad it's you, mum,' he added. 'I were a-dreamin', mum ; and I thought as he were a-hittin' of me again. He's allus a-hittin' of me, mum.'

'He? Who, Tom?'

'Why, father,' said Tom; 'and, as if hittin' warn't enough, he kicks me, too, sometimes. I'se mortal glad, I can tell 'ee, mum; when he's in gaol. And mother, she ain't much better,' concluded the poor lad.

'Poor boy!' said Mrs. Briggs.

'Thanky, mum; but I don't mind now,' was Tom's cheerful response.

Mrs. Briggs now sent Tom into the back kitchen to wash and prepare for breakfast, while she made the tea, for the kettle was boiling by this time. When he returned, and had at her dictation offered up a morning prayer, they sat down together to a simple but substantial meal.

As breakfast proceeded, Mrs. Briggs mentioned to Tom her intention of sending him to school.

'Would you like to go to school, Tom?' she asked.

Tom looked at her for a moment without replying. This was a question which evidently had not presented itself to his mind before, and could not be answered on the spur of the moment. After a considerable pause came the boy's tardy reply:

'Don't know, mum; never went to school afore, and don't 'xactly know what it's like.

Is it nice?' And then, after another pause, he added, 'I don't think as I should like it very much, mum. Some o' them boys as goes to school hollers after me, and throws stones at me, and that like, and there's no tellin' what they might do if I was to go to school along of 'em.'

'They would perhaps treat you more kindly, Tom, if you were one of themselves,' Mrs. Briggs ventured to suggest.

'I don't know, I'se sure, mum.' And then, as his eye fell upon his new clothes, he added, with a brightening face, 'Perhaps they would, though, for, you see, I ain't got no rags now, mum.'

'To be sure,' said Mrs. Briggs, glad to encourage the idea.

It required, after this, very little persuasion to induce Tom to consent to the proposal that he should go to school. Indeed, the slight misgiving he had felt as to the treatment he might receive from the boys of more respectable antecedents having been banished from his mind, he became as eager as he had before been reluctant that the proposal in question should be carried out.

'When *are* I to go, mum?' he asked, with great eagerness.

'To-day, Tom, directly after breakfast.'

'My eye! you don't say so, mum!' And Tom addressed himself with great vigour to that part of his breakfast which still remained upon his plate, being evidently fearful lest he should not have finished in time.

'Yes, Tom,' said good Mrs. Briggs; 'I do say so indeed, and I mean it too. But, Tom, don't say "my eye;" it's a kind of swearing.'

'Is it, mum?' asked the poor boy in some alarm.

'Yes, Tom; but you'll be careful in future, won't you?'

'In course I will, mum, if you says so.'

'And now, Tom,' she said, 'as I see you have finished your breakfast, put your hands together as I do, and we'll thank God for the food He has given us.'

Tom clasped his hands in exact imitation of Mrs. Briggs, and then sat looking at her with wonder in his widely opened eyes.

'Shut youreyes, Tom,' said Mrs. Briggs, 'as I do;' and she suited the action to the word.

Tom's eyes also were shut in a moment. And then the good little woman, with much simplicity, returned thanks for their meal to the bountiful Giver of all good, in words which she had learned as a child from the lips of her mother.

After this she reached her well-worn Bible

from a side table ; and, having read aloud in her homely fashion a portion of the sacred volume, knelt down, with Tom at her side, and offered up a simple but earnest prayer for herself and the poor benighted lad.

When they rose from their knees, Tom was, as usual, ready with a question.

‘Wot was that as you read, mum?’ he asked.

‘The Bible, Tom—the book of God, that tells us how to be good and get to heaven.’

‘Did God make it Hissself, mum, up in heaven?’

‘Not exactly, Tom. God told a great many good men what He wanted to have put into His book, and they wrote it down.’

‘How did He tell them?’ asked Tom, rather to the perplexity of his willing but simple-minded instructress. ‘I should think He couldn’t speak, if He isn’t a man.’

‘No, Tom, God did not speak to them, but He put into their minds what He wanted them to write.’

‘O!’ said the poor lad with a vacant look. He was silenced, but not satisfied.

‘And now,’ said Mrs. Briggs, fearful lest Tom should ask more questions, ‘run into the back kitchen, and give your hair another

touch of the brush, and sponge your hands and mouth, and then we'll go to school.'

Tom obeyed. When he returned, looking as clean and tidy as though he had been all his life a stranger to rags and dirt, Mrs. Briggs took him by the hand, and the two left the house and started for the school.

On their way the good woman impressed upon her young companion the importance of coming home without delay as soon as the school was dismissed for dinner.

'For you know, Tom,' she said, 'I shall have some errands for you to run then, and some more in the evening; and, if I let you go to school, you must attend to your errands between times. I trust to your honour, you know, Tom. You must not stop to play on the way, but come straight home, and see if I have anywhere for you to go; and if not, you shall play then.'

'Yes, mum,' said Tom, evidently delighted to be trusted.

When they reached the school, the clock with which the building was surmounted showed that five minutes had yet to elapse before nine. In consequence, many of the scholars were grouped together in the playground and near the school door. As Mrs.

Briggs and her young charge appeared on the scene, there was a general shout.

‘Here’s Tom Stokes, in a new suit of clothes, come to school!’

They were surrounded by a crowd. Some pinched Tom, some jeered at him, some called him ‘gaol bird.’ Tom was dismayed, and would have run away, but that his hand was firmly locked in that of Mrs. Briggs.

‘For shame, boys!’ she cried with honest indignation, her face fairly glowing as she looked around on the jeering and clamorous crowd. Thus apostrophized, the troop of boys fell back a little, and Mrs. Briggs and Tom pressed forward into the school, where, though not without misgiving, she left her now reluctant charge.

Mrs. Briggs went home and busied herself about her work. Every day in the week except two she attended one or other of the markets in the neighbouring towns. This was Thursday, one of the two days in question. Consequently, on her return after taking Tom to school, the diligent little woman employed herself in the thorough performance of certain household duties, to which, on the days when her business called her away from home, she was unable to give the attention they required. Her particular

occupation, at the moment of which we are about to speak, was the very necessary but too frequently neglected one of sweeping the floor. The habitual cheerfulness of the little woman's disposition had been increased this morning by the success of her attempt to get Tom to school, and her face was even more radiant than usual. So, as was natural, little Mrs. Briggs began to sing. She had a sweet voice, and a soul attuned to holy melody ; and this was not the first occasion, by a great many, on which her broom had kept vigorous time to the sweet music of a hymn.

It was her favourite hymn that she was singing. Nor was she singular in this preference. The words in which she poured forth the happiness of her spirit are laden with a holy and exultant joy which has charmed the griefs of many a burdened heart. Who has not sung them with rapture? who has not felt thankful for the inspiration which bade them flow from the poet's pen? They were :

‘ My God, the spring of all my joys,
The life of my delights,
The glory of my brightest days,
And comfort of my nights !’

After singing thus far, Mrs. Briggs paused to think of Tom. How thankful she felt that

God had helped her hitherto in her humble work of love! And yet she was anxious about the poor lad. She almost feared he would not stay at school. He had been willing enough to go at first, of course. But then he did not know what it would be like, and the novelty of the idea pleased him.

She feared that this wild, half-savage lad would not long submit to the restraint of school discipline. Moved by such misgivings, she prayed earnestly for the poor boy. And then, reassured, she resumed her song:

‘In darkest shades, if Thou appear,
My dawning is begun ;
Thou art my soul’s bright Morning Star,
And Thou my rising Sun.’

And then again she prayed, and was beginning to feel much comforted in reference to the subject of her fears, when, looking out at the window, whom should she see but Tom himself! There he was, peeping in through the glass with a dubious face, as though asking if he might be allowed to enter.

Little Mrs. Briggs was startled and alarmed. Her reassuring thoughts fled like a flock of frightened sparrows, and the sunshine faded from her face. Tom, whose face, when she looked up, was pressed against the window-

pane, was frightened when he saw the cloud upon her brow, and turned to run away. Quick as thought the good little woman stood at the open door.

'Tom! Tom! don't run away. I'm not angry with you,' she cried.

Tom paused in his flight, turned round, stood for a moment irresolute, and finally, reassured by the kindly face and earnest entreaties of his little benefactress, came slowly back to the door.

'Now, Tom,' said Mrs. Briggs kindly, as she took him by the hand and led him into the house, 'come in and tell me all about it.'

Tom hung his head and was silent.

'It's only half an hour, Tom, since I left you at school, and are you tired of it already?'

Still Tom did not reply.

'Have the boys been teasing you, Tom?'

'No, mum,' said Tom at length, finding his voice; 'they ain't said nothin' to me, 'cause the master he don't let 'em talk in school.'

'What is it, then? Did the master send you away?'

'No, mum, not he didn't. He didn't know as I was a-coming out. You see, mum, he put me to sit agen the door, and every time it were opened everything looked so bright and pleasant-like outside, and it were so dull

and still in that 'ere school. So, when the master went out of the room for some'at, I just slipped out too and comed away. And please, mum, don't you let me go to school any more.'

Poor little Mrs. Briggs! For a moment she was nonplussed. What could she say? what could she do? She was silent for some time. At last she spoke.

'O, Tom, don't say that. Remember how glad you were to go to school this morning.'

'Yes, mum, but I didn't know what it were like then. I thought as it 'ud be nicer somehow.'

'Well, but, Tom, you must have patience, and you will like it better when you get used to it.'

'I don't think as I shall, mum,' said Tom doggedly.

'I think you will, my boy,' said Mrs. Briggs in a cheerful tone. 'And then, you know, if you don't go to school, you'll never make anything out in the world. You'll grow up an ignorant, good-for-nothing man. You know, Tom, I want you to become clever and good. And wouldn't you like to be able to read all the beautiful things there are in books, and in the Bible too—all about God and heaven? If you would, you know, you

must go to school, because I'm no scholar myself, and I can't teach you much. And O, Tom,' she continued in a pleading tone, 'I shall be so sadly disappointed if you don't go to school any more. You will go, won't you, for my sake? You'd like to please me, wouldn't you, Tom *dear*?' And the little woman's eyes filled with tears.

Tom had listened in silence, and, though Mrs. Briggs waited some time, he made no reply. She therefore judged it better to let the matter rest for a time, that he might think of what she had said. She would not be too urgent with him at present. He would most likely come round again by and by. So she said to him :

'But we'll not say anything more about it just now, Tom, my boy. There's just a little errand or two that you can do before dinner. These straws have to go to Mrs. Brown's, and these to Mrs. White's; and here's a note I want you to take to Mr. Tompkins, and be sure you wait for an answer; and don't stop to play, but come straight back when you've done, there's a good boy. I trust to you, you know, Tom.'

So saying, she gave Tom two bundles of smooth, straight, evenly cut straws, such as the plaiters used, and, putting the note for

Mr. Tompkins into his hand, started him upon his errands. The poor lad ran off with alacrity, being evidently much relieved in mind.

The manner in which Tom performed these errands fully justified the confidence which his kind-hearted mistress placed in him. The boy was proud to be trusted ; and so, when he had carefully conveyed to the hands of Mrs. White and Mrs. Brown the bundles of straw designed for them respectively, and delivered the note to Mr. Tompkins and received an answer to it, he returned swiftly to his new home without once stopping or turning aside. And this was the more praiseworthy in Tom, because he passed a group of his old companions playing at marbles, and was earnestly solicited by them to join their game.

Mrs. Briggs herself was surprised to see him back so soon, and rewarded him with a few words of genial praise, which brought a look of sunny pleasure to his face. It was evident that she was fast finding her way to the heart of poor Tom Stokes.

This fact received further evidence after dinner. Until that meal was over, Mrs. Briggs had said nothing more to Tom about going to school again ; and, when the subject

was at length resumed, Tom himself was the first to mention it. The heart of Mrs. Briggs had been heavy with anxiety ever since Tom's unceremonious return from school. As may be supposed, her happy song, which had been interrupted by his appearance at the window, had not been resumed. But, if she could no longer sing, she could still pray. And pray she did, all the remainder of the morning, with all her heart and soul, that she might be guided in this new difficulty, and that poor Tom might be induced to forego his prejudice against going to school.

And Tom? He had not forgotten what Mrs. Briggs had said to him in the morning. Her closing appeal had produced a deeper effect upon him than she thought. The poor neglected lad was beginning to find out that there was some one in the world who cared for him and loved him; and, what was more, to feel in his own heart the kindling of an answering love. The last words little Mrs. Briggs had spoken that morning, in trying to persuade him to go to school again, had been in his mind ever since. 'You'd like to please me, wouldn't you, Tom *dear*?' These words, it is not too much to say, had communicated to Tom a revelation. They had exhibited many things to him in a new light. They

had even created a new motive in his heart. They had led him to think of all the kindness and love she had shown him—how she had clothed and fed him, and rescued him from the wretchedness of his former life, and received him to a *home* and a *mother's* heart—until he began to feel that he really would like to please her. His gratitude to this his first and only earthly friend, which had hitherto been but a glimmering spark, burst into a flame. He had been taken captive by the loving-kindness of this simple woman, and became henceforth her willing and devoted slave. And thus it was that he had been so expeditious with his errands, and received with such pleasure the praises of his mistress on his return; and thus it came about that, after dinner, he looked up in the anxious face of little Mrs. Briggs, and said :

‘I’ll go to school again this afternoon, mum, if you’ve a mind; for you see, mum, you’ve done a sight o’ things for me, and I should like to please you, as you was a-saying.’

Mrs. Briggs lifted her heart in joyful gratitude to God.

‘That’s a good boy,’ she said, drawing him to her side and kissing his no longer grimy face. And then she added, as she smoothed with her hand his thick black hair, ‘There’s

Some One else Who will be pleased with you, Tom, beside me.'

'Is there?' said Tom. 'Who's that? Do you mean the master, mum?'

'No, Tom. He will be pleased, I dare say, but I didn't mean him. God is pleased with you, my boy. He always is when you do right.'

'Is He, mum? I'm glad o' that,' said the boy seriously.

Tom was soon ready for school. As he left the house, Mrs. Briggs put into his hand a note she had written while he had been washing his hands and face in the back kitchen. It was directed to the schoolmaster, and ran as follows :—

'DEAR SIR,—Please don't be angry with this poor boy for running away from school this morning. He's very sorry, and I don't think he'll do it again.—Yours respectfully,

'MARTHA BRIGGS.'

'There, Tom,' she said; 'take that to the master, and I don't think he'll say anything to you about what you did this morning.'

Tom started off in high spirits, holding very tightly the note for the master, which he seemed to regard as a precious treasure, that must on no account be lost.

For the first half hour after Tom was gone Mrs. Briggs was anxious and restless. But, as the afternoon wore away and he did not appear, she was reassured. And when, at the proper time, he came home, quiet and cheerful, she received him with a placid smile of satisfaction.

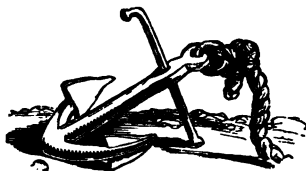
'Well, Tom, what did the master say?' she asked.

'He spoke rather cross at first, mum,' said Tom, 'and asked me, what did I mean by running away this morning? But when he read that 'ere paper as you sent, he left off, and told me to go to my seat, and not run away no more. And please, mum, I won't; not,' he added with much energy, 'if I live to be as old as Methuseler.'

'Methuseler, Tom! Methuselah, you mean. But where did you hear about him? We read about him in the Bible,' said Mrs. Briggs, with an amused smile.

'I don't know about that, mum, I'm sure,' said Tom. 'Him as I mean must ha' lived to be a very old man. It's father as I've heerd talk on him. He says, when he's angry wi' me like, as I shan't be no good, no, not if I lives to be as old as Methuseler. I reckon that's another chap as is in the Bible.'

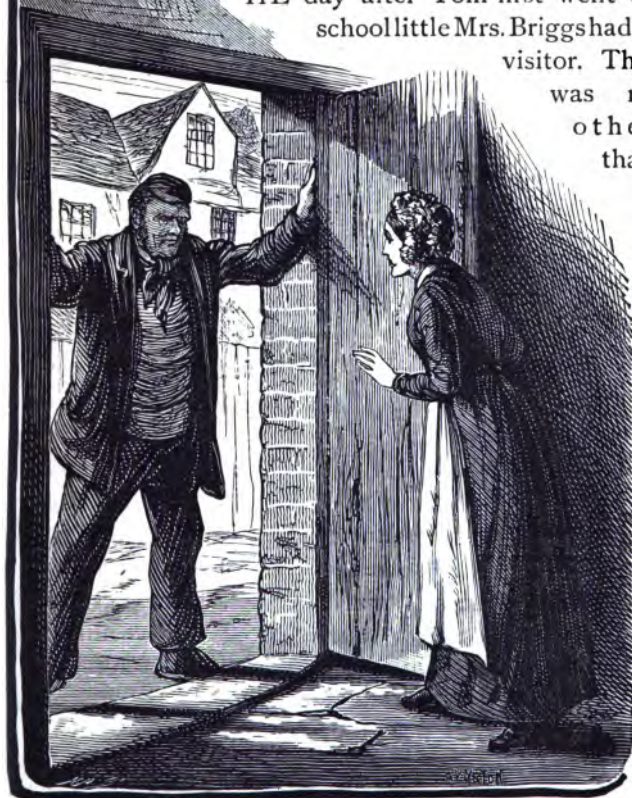
‘No, Tom, he’s the same. He lived till he was nearly a thousand years old. You won’t live as long as that, my boy ; but there’s time to do a great deal of good in even the shortest life.’



CHAPTER. IV.

TOM IS CAPTURED BY HIS
FATHER.

THE day after Tom first went to
school little Mrs. Briggs had a
visitor. This
was no
other
than



Tom's father ; and he came about the middle of the afternoon, a time when, to the great relief of the good little woman, on this occasion at least, Tom was at school.

Neither Mrs. Briggs nor Tom himself knew in what light the transfer of his son to the guardianship of Mrs. Briggs, and the consequent shifting of parental responsibility to her shoulders, were regarded by Mr. Stokes. Since he left his wretched home, Tom had not seen his father. That unnatural parent did not much affect the daylight. His deeds were of the darkness. Most of the hours of daylight he spent in bed ; and it would not have been surprising if father and son had not met for many months to come.

In fact, however, Tom's father did by no means approve of the act of his wife in handing over to little Mrs. Briggs the person of his eldest son. For this he had two reasons. In the first place, he had not been consulted in the matter ; and this is in itself a sufficient reason with some people for disapproving even of the best arrangements. And, besides this, Tom was beginning to be very useful to his father in connection with many of the dark and lawless undertakings by means of which that unscrupulous man gained his precarious livelihood.

Tom's father was, indeed, very angry ; and, as may be supposed, the first outburst of his rage fell upon the by no means unoffending head of his wife, who, to say the truth, returned with interest the assaults of both his tongue and hand. His next thoughts were given to Mrs. Briggs, upon whom he bestowed, in her absence, some very fierce and brutal epithets. And then, having somewhat cooled down, he began to consider by what means he could recover his lost son, who, he said, had 'bin stole from him by that 'ere critter of a woman.'

Tom's father was not a great reader. But he did sometimes borrow from a neighbour the Sunday newspaper. At such times he would read—sitting on his door-step, dirty, ragged, and unkempt, and smoking a short black pipe, while the Sabbath air was throbbing with the music of the church bells—the sporting news, the police news, and all the horrors contained in the columns of the papers. More than once, in the course of his reading, he had come across the report of the trial of some wicked and designing man or woman for the abduction of an unsuspecting boy or girl from their home. These instances came to his mind now, and he put it to his wife whether the case of their boy was not clearly one of 'abduction.'

'Anyhow,' he said, with a short, coarse laugh, 'I'll frighten the critter with it. I'll tell her, if she don't give up that 'ere boy peaceable, I'll have the law on her for abduction.'

And then he laughed again more loudly and more coarsely than before.

'Let the boy alone,' snapped the mother; 'it's good riddance to be shut of him.'

'You shut up,' was the husband's reply, as he left the house.

'Go on wi' yer,' retorted the wife with an oath.

But there was no answer, except the echo of her husband's retreating footsteps as he slouched down the court, on the way to his favourite public-house.

The above passage between Tom's father and mother took place on the day when Tom first went to school. After turning the matter over in his mind for some hours, Mr. Stokes decided to go at once to Mrs. Briggs and demand his son, reserving the threat of which he had spoken to his wife for use in case his first demand should be refused.

Mrs. Briggs, as we have seen, was at home that day. She had been very busy about the house all the morning, and, in spite of

numerous interruptions in the shape of callers on business, had finished her work by three o'clock in the afternoon. The floor of her little sitting-room was as clean as the spotless white deal table in its centre, and that is saying a great deal ; every discoverable speck of dust had been removed from the furniture ; the fireplace was faultless ; and the little woman herself, after a brief absence up-stairs, added, as she sat down, cheerful and tidy, ' to do a bit of sewing ' till tea-time, the finishing touch to a picture of cleanliness and comfort such as is not rare, thank God, in English homes.

She was already busy with her needle, when there came a heavy knock, or rather a thump, at the street door, as though some one had fallen against it. The little woman started from her seat, and, laying her work on the table, made haste to open the door. The next moment she would have made as much haste to shut it again. But this was out of the question ; for the coarse, drunken-looking man, whose clumsy attempt to knock at the door had resulted in the thumping noise she had heard, stood in the very doorway itself, swaying backwards and forwards in a very tipsy manner, and only prevented from falling by holding the two door-posts.

Mrs. Briggs saw that he intended to address her when he could sufficiently steady himself to do so. She knew the man too well, and her heart misgave her. At last he spoke.

'What ha' you done wi' that 'ere cub o' mine, missus?' he said coarsely.

'O, Mr. Stokes!' gasped little Mrs. Briggs, shocked and dismayed.

'Don't "mister" me,' growled the man. 'My name's Tom Stokes, *old* Tom Stokes, same as that 'ere young dog o' mine as you've stole away 's *young* Tom Stokes. What ha' you done wi' him, missus, d'ye hear?'

'Don't ask me, there's a good man,' pleaded the poor woman. 'He's better along with me. I mean well by him, indeed I do. And I'll tell him to love you, and he shall come to see you whenever he likes.'

Tom's father laughed loudly at this.

'Ha, ha! come to see me whenever he likes! That won't be often, I reckon. And you means well by him? Well, I don't find no fault wi' that, as fur as it goes; but look you here, missus, I want the boy, and I'll hev him. What ha' you done wi' him? Come, out wi' it. I'm a-goin' to take him home wi' me now.'

How thankful was little Mrs. Briggs that Tom was at school! She devoutly prayed

that he might not return until his half-drunken father was gone.

'Your son is not here,' she now said to the man. 'He's out just now; but when he comes home I'll ask him if he would like to come back to you.'

Tom's father laughed again.

'Come, come, missus,' he said, 'this 'ere won't do. I'll tell you what it is; that 'ere young whelp comes back to me whether he likes it or whether he don't. And if you keeps him arter this, you'll get more nor you've bargained for. Do you know what you've bin an' done, missus?' inquired Mr. Stokes severely. 'You've *abducted* that 'ere boy. That means,' he added with a sneer, 'as you've stole him away from his sorrering friends. And I'll tell ye what, missus, there's a law agin them as abducts little boys. And I'll hev the law on ye, missus, as sure as you're alive, if that boy don't come back to our court to night.'

So saying, the man turned and staggered away.

Mrs. Briggs hastily shut and bolted the door, and sank down, with a beating heart, upon the nearest chair. Here was a difficulty of which she had not dreamed. She had supposed that, after her agreement with

Tom's mother, the poor boy would have been left entirely in her hands. It had not occurred to her that his father might not fall in with the arrangement, and might want to have him back again. And now, what did this threat of the law mean? Surely the law of a Christian country would not punish her for trying to save a poor boy from poverty and vice! And yet she saw now that she could not keep poor Tom, if his father persisted in demanding that he should return home.

She was in great distress. It seemed as though her loving efforts were to be nipped in the bud. It was a terrible thought, that now, after he had left his old life, and was beginning already to give promise of something better, he should be dragged back to it by the hands of his own father. By the help of God she had already pulled him up from the black depths of ignorance and crime; and now, just as she was beginning to think he was safe, he was slipping from her hands back into the foul, dark waters.

'But no,' she moaned; 'it's too terrible! It can't be! God won't let the poor boy be lost after all. He will help me even yet.' And then she prayed with fast falling tears, and waited anxiously for Tom's return from school.

The time passed, and the anxiety of little Mrs. Briggs increased. Four o'clock, a quarter past, half past, and still he had not come. Where was he? What could be keeping him? It was almost time for Tom to be coming home when his father left her door, and she feared they must have met, and the boy have been forcibly taken back to Pincher's Court. Let us see what foundation there was for her fears.

About the same time as Tom's father left the house of little Mrs. Briggs, Tom himself started from school. He had become somewhat reconciled to the school, and was beginning on this second day to take an interest in his lessons; and the master had this afternoon warmly commended his diligence, so that altogether Tom felt very happy as he ran along.

Mr. Stokes, having left little Mrs. Briggs' house in high dudgeon, stumbled tipsily along, muttering audibly to himself. In this fashion he was turning the first corner, when he was brought to a stand by a boy who, having been hurrying round the corner in the opposite direction, had unwittingly rushed into his arms.

Tom's father was about to throw the boy off with an oath and a cuff, when he discovered, to his astonishment, that it was his own son

Tom who had thus unceremoniously run into his embrace. As for Tom, his astonishment at this unexpected encounter, which was no less than that of his father, was only equalled by his dismay. Instinctively he drew back from his dreaded parent, and would have run away, had not his father seized him roughly by the wrist.

‘Not so fast, young un,’ he exclaimed. ‘You wouldn’t run away from your own father, would you?’

So saying, he began to drag his captured boy in the direction of Pincher’s Court. Poor Tom! he struggled hard at first, but to no purpose. His father’s grasp was like an iron vice.

‘You’d best come quietly, you young dog,’ growled the brutal father, ‘or I’ll break every bone in your skin when I get you home. I’ll teach you,’ he added, ‘to run away from your own natural born parents.’

‘You let me go, father,’ gasped Tom, as he struggled violently. ‘Let me go; I don’t want to have nothing to do with you.’ ‘Can we wonder at words like these to such a father from the lips of his son? But the more Tom struggled the tighter became his father’s grasp upon his wrist, and the more fiercely he dragged him along. And thus, at

length, not without attracting some attention in the streets through which they passed, they arrived in Pincher's Court. There, as may be supposed, their appearance created no slight sensation. But Tom's father lost no time in rendering his captive secure. Making for his own door, he dragged his still struggling son into the house, and shut the door in the face of the little crowd which had quickly gathered round it, and which was thus driven to the window, where they vainly strove, by flattening their faces against its panes, to distinguish clearly, through the dirt with which these were begrimed, what was going on within.

Mrs. Briggs waited and watched for Tom's return with growing anxiety. And when five o'clock had passed, and the hands of her old Dutch clock pointed solemnly to the hour of six, the fear that had been growing in her mind became at last almost a certainty. Tom's father had without doubt met him on his way from school, and taken forcible possession of him. Having arrived at this conviction, which she did with a sinking heart, the good little woman was not long in deciding what to do. It cost her a mighty effort, but she was determined not to shrink from anything by means of which she might

yet save poor Tom. 'For Christ's sake, and for the sake of this poor boy,' she said to herself as she rose from her seat and put on her homely bonnet and shawl.

She went first to the school, to make quite sure that Tom was not still there. The school was shut, and the gates locked ; and, on inquiry of the master, who lived close by, Mrs. Briggs found that Tom had left school with the majority of the other boys at four o'clock. There was nothing now, therefore, but to try Pincher's Court. So, lifting her trembling heart to God for strength and guidance, the brave little woman turned her steps in the direction of that haunt of poverty and crime.

Arrived in the court, she was welcomed by the youthful populace with shouts of joy.

'Hooray! There's that 'ooman as Tom Stokes went off with. What a game!' And the urchins left their play and trooped around her, as she stood knocking at the door of the hovel where Tom's parents lived. The door was opened by Tom's mother, and brisk little Mrs. Briggs slipped in without giving the woman time to recognise her or say her nay.

Tom was seated, when his benefactress entered, upon the heap of dirty straw which

aforetime had been his bed. He had evidently been crying bitterly, and was still sobbing. But on the entrance of his one friend, from whom he had lately been so roughly separated, he started up with a cry and ran into her ready arms.

‘I know’d as you’d come, mum,’ he sobbed, and then his tears burst forth afresh.

‘Hush, Tom, hush!’ said the kindly little woman, trying to soothe him.

Tom’s father, who was lying asleep upon the wooden settle, awoke at the sound of her entrance, and, starting up, saw at a glance how matters stood.

‘Well,’ he exclaimed, ‘this beats all!’ And then he assailed his visitor in language which she has never been able to think of since without a shudder. Mrs. Briggs trembled; and Tom, at the sound of his father’s voice, clung to her more desperately than before.

‘Now, missus, what do you want?’ demanded the father fiercely. ‘Let that ’ere boy alone, will yer? He’s none o’ yours. And you come away from her, you young dog, and get onto that ’ere straw again, or I’ll give yer another wopping.’ And then, flinging an oath at his wife for letting Mrs.

Briggs enter the house, he sprang to his feet, and, snatching Tom from the little woman's embrace, threw him violently back upon the straw.

Mrs. Briggs felt her courage failing ; but she was conscious of the necessity of being firm. So, with another prayer for strength from above, she made a great effort and addressed the furious man.

'Now come, Mr. Stokes,' she said calmly, though her voice would tremble just a little, 'don't stand in the poor boy's way. God knows I don't want to steal him away from you. But if you'll only let him live with me, he shall come to see you whenever you like ; and I'll see that he has good food and clothes, and a bit of schooling, and I'll teach him all that's good ; and I'm sure he'll be all the better son to you for it, Mr. Stokes. Now *do* let me take him home with me again, there's a good man.'

Mr. Stokes laughed derisively. 'Now look here, missus, this 'ere won't do at all. That 'ere boy stays along o' me. So the sooner you takes yourself off the better. There's the door,' he added coarsely. 'Just open it, will yer?' he said to his wife, 'and put the woman out.'

Thus enjoined, Mrs. Stokes moved sullenly towards the door ; and little Mrs. Briggs,

feeling that the case was now desperate, proceeded to put in practice a device which she had reserved as a last resource.

'Stop a minute,' she said, arresting the woman's hand, which was already on the latch of the door. 'Mr. Stokes, I'm not a rich woman, but I'd give a great deal to save that poor boy. What will you take to let him go home with me again?'

'Ah, now you speak!' said the man in a mollified tone. 'Why didn't you say that afore? Woman,' he shouted to his wife, 'what are you a-doing with that 'ere door? Let it alone, can't you?'

It is sufficient to add that, after some little discussion, it was arranged that Tom should be permitted to live, unmolested by his parents, with little Mrs. Briggs, on condition of the payment by her to his father of the sum of eighteenpence a week.

This arrangement concluded, to the great delight of poor Tom, Mrs. Briggs took the now happy boy by the hand, and together they turned their backs once more on Pincher's Court.

Tom's benefactress was soon convinced of the necessity of sending him, not only to the day, but also to the Sunday school. She

was delighted with the keen interest he manifested in spiritual things, but felt quite unable to give him the information concerning them that he needed and desired. The simple-minded little woman was, as we have seen, much puzzled by some of the questions of this shrewd boy. She had taken for granted from the first the mysteries of her religion, and was quite unable to furnish Tom with that explanation of them which she had never so much as desired for herself. She therefore felt that she must call in the aid of others, wiser than she was, for the purpose of instructing the lad 'in the way of God more perfectly.' It had, moreover, been a foregone conclusion with her from the first that her young charge must go to the Sunday school,

Accordingly, on the following Sunday morning, being the first after Tom had taken up his abode in her house, Mrs. Briggs, leading the boy by the hand, set off, as nine o'clock drew near, to the school-house to which Tom had gone during the week, for there the Sunday school was held. Tom was kindly received by the superintendent of the school—a rather stout, elderly man, with a kind, grave face, and hair as white as snow. As Mrs. Briggs went home alone,

she felt that this time, at least, she had left her boy in safe hands.

The good superintendent placed the new scholar at a side form, until singing and prayer were over. Then, having first arranged a few necessary matters, he approached the place where the boy was sitting, and began to question him as to his attainments. These, as the reader knows, were not great.

'Well, my boy,' said the good man in a kindly tone, 'can you read?'

'Not much,' said Tom, which was strictly true.

'Let us see,' said the superintendent, reaching a small spelling-book, and opening at the alphabet page.

Tom was all alive in a moment. 'I knows what that is,' he exclaimed, bringing his finger down with a pounce upon one of the letters. 'That's O, that is.'

'Very good,' said the superintendent, with an amused smile.

'Yes, and that's A, and that 'ere's B, and I knows 'em all. Shall I tell yer what they are?' he added; and then, after a pause, 'But perhaps yer knows?'

'O yes, Tom, I know them,' said the kindly man, more and more amused.

'Do yer?' said Tom. 'I didn't know 'em till this 'ere last week. Who told yer what they was?'

'I learned them when I was a little boy like you, Tom; but never mind about that now. See here, do you know what this is?' And, as he spoke, he took up one of the school Bibles and opened it.

'That's a book, that is,' said Tom.

'Yes, but what book?'

'Dunno,' was Tom's reply.

'It's the Bible, Tom.'

'That the Bible!' exclaimed the boy incredulously. 'I knows it ain't, then. 'Tain't big enough. The Bible's a great big book, and it's a-lying on the table at Mrs. Briggs's. I see it there as we was a-coming out just now.'

'Yes, yes, Tom, that was one Bible, but there are a great many others. There are Bibles of all sizes, and with all sorts of printing in them; but the words in them are the same, and they're all the same Bible.'

Tom opened his eyes and said 'O!'

'Well, now, Tom,' continued the good superintendent, 'do you know who gave us the Bible?'

'Yes,' said Tom with some eagerness; 'it was God as did that, Him as is in heaven,

and in Mrs. Briggs's house, and everywhere ; Him as we pray to, you know.'

'Quite right, my boy. Now, can you tell me what God gave us the Bible for?'

'I dunno much about that,' replied Tom, shaking his head ; for he had but a confused recollection of what Mrs. Briggs had told him on this subject a few days ago ; 'but warn't it to help us to be good, or some'at o' that sort?'

'You are not far from right, Tom,' said the good man, stroking the boy's head. 'Only mind what the Bible says, my boy, and you will be a good man some day. But come,' he added, 'let us see how well you can read. What is this word, now?'

'That 'ere's i, n, in,' said Tom promptly. 'And this 'ere's,' he continued in his eager way, running his fingers along the line,—'this 'ere's a, n, d, and.'

The superintendent smiled.

'Not bad, Tom,' he said, 'after no more than a week's schooling. You're a very sharp lad.'

'Are I?' said Tom, with the utmost composure, and not the slightest appearance of pride.

'Yes, indeed ; but come, now, let us see what else you know. What is this word?'

'Dunno,' said Tom decisively. 'Dunno any more words.'

'Well, Tom,' said the good man, more and more amused, 'you're a sharp boy, as I said before, to have learned so much in so short a time; and I hope you'll turn your sharpness to good account. You must learn as fast as you can, and then you'll soon be able to read for yourself all about God and the good Lord Jesus, His Son, Who died to save us. And now I must put you with these little boys to-day; but, if you go on as you've begun, you'll soon get into a higher class.'

So Tom found himself sitting on a very low form, under which he was obliged to tuck his legs in a position anything but comfortable, in company with seven or eight boys all several years younger than himself. The teacher of the class was a sweet-faced young lady of about one-and-twenty, to whose earnest words the thoughtless urchins paid quite as much attention as could be expected of them, and far more than they would have bestowed on the teachings of ninety-nine out of any hundred of the opposite sex. A book was placed in Tom's hand, and he was regularly installed as one of the class. The other boys, finding one so much older than themselves set to learn with them their simple

lessons, giggled a little at first. But Tom took no heed of them, having neither eyes nor ears for aught save the teacher and the lesson. The latter was the story, written in a very simple style, of David, the shepherd boy who became a king; and when Tom joined the class the teacher was talking to them about what they had been reading. Tom listened with greedy ears. The story, charming enough in itself, was made even more so to him by its complete novelty. He had never heard it before. And Tom thought, too, that he saw a slight resemblance in the case of David to his own. True, he had neither been a shepherd boy nor become a king. But he had been raised from a position quite as low as that of David the shepherd boy, and even lower, to one which seemed to him almost as high as though, like David, he had actually been made king of Israel. And then, now that he had begun to rise, there was no telling what he might become. So Tom was mightily interested in the story of David.

But, if the poor boy was so captivated even with the history of David, how shall I speak of the eagerness with which he drank in every word that fell from the teacher's lips when she went on to tell the story of Jesus and His love? But my readers have all been

thrilled by that story, and will not have forgotten the mighty charm it exercised upon them, when, as children, they heard it for the first time from the lips of a devoted teacher, or, perchance, at a mother's knee. It was not actually the first time Tom had heard the story of redeeming love; but hitherto he had not listened to it with anything like a clear appreciation of its meaning. When he first heard it from the lips of little Mrs. Briggs, it had filled him with astonishment, but had stirred no deeper feeling in his breast. It did not seem then that this wonderful story of suffering and love had anything to do with him. But now that he heard it from the lips of one who knew well how to reach the hearts as well as the minds of the children under her care, he began to see and feel how deeply he himself was concerned in the story; though it would be too much to say that as yet he fully comprehended how Christ could be his Saviour.

Tom went with the other scholars to the chapel when service time arrived. The children sat in the gallery; and Tom glanced down from his place, and saw that little Mrs. Briggs looked up at him from her pew with a face radiant with happiness. This pleased him and helped him to behave himself during the service.

The pulpit was occupied by a local preacher. The sermon was homely and useful, and went right to the hearts of the people. But, though the preacher addressed himself several times to the children in the gallery, in whom he evidently felt a great interest, many of the young folks were restless and disorderly. Tom, however, behaved as well as the best. For one thing, the novelty of his surroundings, and of the service itself, helped to engage his attention. And although there was, in the nature of things, much in the sermon which was as completely lost upon the poor boy as though it had been spoken in a foreign language, yet he managed to understand some of the things the preacher said. And then he thought of Mrs. Briggs, and how pleased she would be to know that he had been a good boy. And, besides all this, he was, as we have seen, beginning to have a real wish to know about God and the way to heaven. And so Tom Stokes, the boy who had spent all his days in one of the darkest lurking-places of sin and crime, and whose disposition was restless and mischief-loving enough, conducted himself, on this his first visit to the house of God, with such propriety as might well have put to the blush some of the boys around him, who had been brought

up from their infancy in the purest atmosphere of respectable piety.

Mrs. Briggs met Tom at the chapel door when the service was over, and they walked home hand in hand.

'Tom,' said the little woman, squeezing his hand, 'I'm so glad you were such a good boy.'

'Thanky, mum,' said Tom simply; 'I thought as you'd like me to, so I kep' as still as I could. But it were rather a long time, warn't it, mum?'

'I didn't think so, Tom; but you see you're not used to it,' said Mrs. Briggs thoughtfully.

'No more I are,' responded the boy.

'And how did you like the Sunday school, Tom?' inquired Mrs. Briggs presently.

'O, prime!' exclaimed Tom. 'I'm a-goin' again this afternoon, ain't I?' he inquired with some anxiety.

'Yes, Tom, that you shall.'

'Thanky, mum; O, thanky!' cried Tom in an enthusiastic tone.

No more was said until they arrived at home.

While they were at dinner, Tom spoke, after a long silence.

'Be that 'ere true, mum, as He really did die for me?'

‘Who, Tom?’

‘Why, Jesus—Him as the lady at school was a-tellin’ us about—Him as you told me on the other day, mum,’ explained Tom.

‘Yes, indeed, Tom, quite true.’

‘It were very kind of Him, I’s e sure,’ said Tom; ‘I’d do Him a good turn if I could. But I say, mum, wot a bad lot them Jews was! There’s a old Jew lives in our yard,’ he continued; ‘I wonder if he had anything to do wi’ it. He looks bad enough.’

‘O no, Tom, no; it took place many, many years ago, long before anybody who is alive now was born.’

‘Did it, mum?’ exclaimed Tom. ‘Well, I never!’

‘Yes, Tom; and Jesus forgave even the Jews who killed Him.’

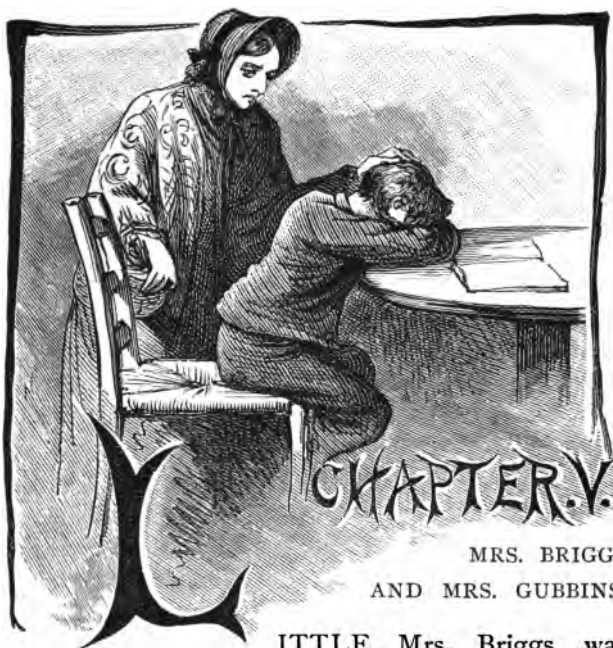
‘Did He though?’ said Tom in amazement. ‘Well, that *were* good on Him! That beats all as ever I heerd tell on! I don’t think as I’d ‘a’ had anythink to do wi’ killing of Him,’ he added after a pause, ‘if I’d bin one o’ them ‘ere Jews.’

‘Perhaps not, Tom,’ said Mrs. Briggs; ‘but we don’t know what we might have done; and you know it was really our sins that killed Him, because it was on account of them that He had to die. But now,’ she continued,

'we can show that we are sorry by repenting of our sins, and believing in Him, and loving Him with all our hearts.'

'Yes, o' course,' said Tom. 'I don't see how anybody can help lovin' of Him after what He've done.'





LITTLE Mrs. Briggs was 'favoured' with neighbours ; and, as is not unusual with neighbours, those of Mrs. Briggs possessed a propensity to investigate the affairs of other people. That this propensity should show itself in relation to the concerns of little Mrs. Briggs was not strange. People who live alone are usually the most *observed* people in the neighbourhood in which they reside. The very manner of their life surrounds them with an air of mystery, which

invites the curiosity and provokes the scrutiny of their neighbours.

Thus it was in the case of Mrs. Briggs. All her movements which were not strictly confined to the seclusion of her own house were scrutinized by the ever-watchful eyes of Mrs. Timmins, her neighbour on the right, and Mrs. Gubbins, her neighbour on the left. Mrs. Timmins was content to watch in silence. There was no mistake as to the *fact* of her watching the movements of her quiet little neighbour; but her cogitations upon what she saw were confined to her own breast, for she never opened her mouth thereupon to any living man or even woman. Not so Mrs. Gubbins. *Her* interest in the affairs of her neighbours, and especially those of little Mrs. Briggs, was of a very practical kind. Her observation of the little woman's behaviour resulted in the administering to the object of her friendly solicitude of sundry pieces of disinterested advice, which Mrs. Briggs received with characteristic meekness.

It would have been strange indeed if the advent of poor Tom Stokes to Mrs. Briggs's house had escaped the lynx eyes—shall we say?—of Mrs. Gubbins. And in fact it had not. That true friend of her species had, as she told certain sister gossips—women after

her own heart—watched the affair from the first with very great anxiety ; and she was afraid ‘ poor, dear Mrs. Briggs had undertaken a thankless task, and would bring a deal of trouble upon herself ;’ and for her—Mrs. Gubbins’s—part, she should feel it her duty, as a friend and fellow-Christian, to speak to Mrs. Briggs about the matter, ‘ kindly, of course, and just to warn her, as a friend and neighbour ought.’

Nor was it long before Mrs. Gubbins carried out her friendly resolution.

It was a lovely summer’s evening about a week after Tom first went to school. Mrs. Briggs was out shopping, and Tom was sitting in the house alone, poring over a simple reading-book ; for he was beginning to feel an eager desire to learn to read. The door was closed, but, though any one outside might have thought otherwise, it was not latched. The latter fact was not known to Mrs. Gubbins, who stood at her own door busy with some plait, the making of which formed the employment of that portion of her time which she could spare from the more pressing duties of her household.

It might have been supposed that Mrs. Gubbins was standing at her door for the purpose of breathing the fresh evening air.

And so, no doubt, in part, she was. But she had also another motive. Possibly the good woman was not altogether uninfluenced in coming to her threshold by a desire to 'have a crack' with any passing acquaintance. But this was not all. Mrs. Gubbins had seen Mrs. Briggs go out, and, judging that her neighbour would not be long before she returned, was now standing at her own door chiefly for the purpose of 'having a word' with the quiet little woman about poor Tom.

Presently Mrs. Briggs appeared in sight, walking briskly, as was her wont. As she approached, Mrs. Gubbins spoke.

'Good evening, Mrs. Briggs, ma'am! A lovely evening, ain't it?'

'It is, indeed; and good evening to *you*, ma'am,' responded Mrs. Briggs, as she stopped a few paces from her door and faced towards her neighbour.

'Been shopping, I see,' remarked Mrs. Gubbins, pointing to the sober market-basket which Mrs. Briggs carried on her arm.

'Yes, ma'am, and I've been kept longer than I meant to stay,' said Mrs. Briggs, turning once more towards her own door.

But Mrs. Gubbins would not let her opportunity slip.

'Mrs. Briggs, ma'am,' she exclaimed in a

loud whisper, thereby arresting the little woman with her foot upon the door-step, 'just a word with you afore you goes in—only a word, ma'am.'

Mrs. Briggs reluctantly returned from her door and advanced a few steps towards that of her neighbour. 'What is it, Mrs. Gubbins?' she said.

'Why, it's this 'ere,' rejoined that lady in the same loud whisper. 'I wanted to ask you if as how you had rightly considered what you was a-doin' in hevin' that 'ere boy in your house.'

'Yes, ma'am, I think I have,' answered little Mrs. Briggs quietly, and without the least sign of resentment at what most people would have regarded as an unwarrantable interference.

'Be you sure, now?' pursued Mrs. Gubbins. 'Happen you don't know what the boy is? He's'—

'Yes, I do,' interrupted Mrs. Briggs. 'I know all about him, I think,—leastways as much, and perhaps more than most people do.'

'Why, he's one o' the worst boys in the town,' continued Mrs. Gubbins, taking no notice of the interruption, 'and there's a many bad uns. He's a regular little aban-

dioned villyan. He lies and swears and fights and steals. There's nothin' bad as he don't do. Did you know as he'd bin in gaol, Mrs. Briggs, for robbin' of the parson's orchard?'

'O yes,' said Mrs. Briggs, 'I know all about that.'

'Do you? Well, I never!' was the astonished cry of Mrs. Gubbins.

'Yes,' continued Mrs. Briggs; 'and that's just the reason why I've taken him. The poor boy has been as bad as he could be; and if anybody needed to be helped and saved, he did.'

'But you don't think,' queried Mrs. Gubbins, in her fussy whisper, 'as you're a-goin' to do any good with him, do you, Mrs. Briggs?'

'Yes,' was the cheerful reply. 'Why not, Mrs. Gubbins? The boy has got a heart; that I have found out already, ma'am. And then I'm looking for help to One Who is greater and wiser than I am.'

'Ay, that's all very fine,' said Mrs. Gubbins, with a sneer; 'but them Stokeses is a bad lot to have anything to do with. Look at the boy's father and mother. They're'—

'Yes,' interposed Mrs. Briggs quickly, 'that's just it, you see. What could you expect from any boy with such a bringing up?'

Mrs. Gubbins crossed her hands in a drooping position in front of her.

'Well,' she said, with an air of superior wisdom and lofty compassion, 'you're bent on it, I see ; but I warns you, Mrs. Briggs, as a neighbour and a Christian,—I warns you as you'll put your foot into it, if you has anything more to do wi' that 'ere Tom Stokes.'

'Thank you, Mrs. Gubbins,' returned Mrs. Briggs, just a little ruffled ; 'you mean well, I'm sure. Good evening, ma'am.' And the meek little woman entered her house and shut the door.

But upon the mat inside she stopped, transfixed with astonishment. At the table, his face buried in his arms over the book he had been reading, sat poor Tom, sobbing and crying as though his heart would break.

In another moment Mrs. Briggs had put down her basket, and was by the side of the weeping boy. 'Tom ! Tom !' she cried, laying her hand gently on his arm ; 'what ails you, my poor boy ?'

Tom made no reply, but cried more bitterly than ever.

'Come, come, Tom,' said the little woman in a tone of distress, 'don't take on like that. Tell me what it is, and perhaps we can put it right. Can't you get on with your

reading? Are some of the words too hard for you?’

But still there was no reply, save another and more violent burst of sobs.

‘What can it be?’ said Mrs. Briggs. ‘You were so happy, Tom, when I went out. What has happened while I have been away to distress you like this? Come, do tell me, Tom; there’s a good boy. I am your friend, you know.’

Thus adjured, Tom presently became more composed, and, without raising his head, said, between his sobs, ‘It were wot her were a-sayin’ on about me just now,’ and he gave his thumb an almost imperceptible jerk towards the house of Mrs. Gubbins.

This was enough. Mrs. Briggs saw it all in a moment. She recollected that, during her recent conversation with her meddlesome neighbour, the house door had stood ajar. Tom had evidently heard every word Mrs. Gubbins had said about him, and this was the cause of his grief. Mrs. Briggs was deeply moved; and, if ever in all her life the good, peaceable little woman was near losing her temper, this, as she often told Tom afterwards, was the time. Indeed, she was only restrained by the necessity of administering immediate comfort to poor Tom from resorting at once

to the dwelling of Mrs. Gubbins, and treating her neighbour to such 'a piece of her mind' as would have been more surprising than pleasant to that officious gossip. As it was, she addressed herself to the kindly task of healing the poor boy's wounded spirit.

'Did you hear all that, my poor child?' she said, putting her hand gently on Tom's arm. 'I *am* grieved. I'd have given anything rather than you should have heard what that woman said. Try not to think about it; there's a good boy.'

Tom was still crying, but his sobs became fewer and less violent as his little benefactress spoke.

'It's all true, mum,' he sobbed, 'what she said. But I ain't a-goin' to be bad like that no more. Leastways I don't mean to. But it's precious hard to be good, ain't it, mum? I sometimes thinks as it's no use trying. But, please, mum, don't you turn a poor boy out into the street again; and don't send me back to them as won't let me be good.'

As poor Tom thus poured out the fulness of his soul, he gradually raised his head, and, as he made his closing appeal, he looked in little Mrs. Briggs' face with tearful and beseeching eyes.

The little woman was quite overcome.

The only answer she could give was to clasp Tom to her heart, whose tears broke out afresh as her own began to flow; and for some moments they wept and sobbed together.

‘No, Tom, no, indeed,’ she said at last. ‘How could you think it? I’ll never turn you out, Tom; don’t be afraid of that. God loves you, and I love you too. He doesn’t cast you off, nor more won’t I. And as for Mrs. Gubbins’—Mrs. Briggs was going to say something quite severe, but she checked herself, and added, ‘Well, we must forgive her, you know, Tom.’

But the troubles of Mrs. Briggs were not yet over. The task which, for love of Christ, she had undertaken was proving by no means an easy one; and a circumstance now occurred which presented a new and unexpected form of discouragement.

So far it had been evident that poor Tom was as anxious for the success of the good little woman’s efforts for his benefit as she was herself. He had, according to his knowledge, honestly and earnestly seconded her loving endeavours to the utmost of his power. It was quite clear that the poor boy was most anxious to rise out of the ignorance and degradation in which he had hitherto

lived ; and that the loving words and deeds of his little benefactress had been by no means wasted upon him. In the fulness of his gratitude there was nothing that he would not do to please her. Nor were there wanting indications that he was beginning to feel and to yield to the influence of the good Spirit of God.

And yet there will appear nothing strange in what we have now to tell. We have but to remember the character of the poor boy's home associations and training—if such it could be called—the atmosphere of brutal selfishness in which his life had hitherto been spent, and the consequent development of the worst passions of his nature, and the event which we must now proceed to relate will appear a most natural and likely thing to have occurred.

Tom did not at first get on very well with his new companions. Under all the circumstances of the case, it would have been strange if the schoolfellows of this disreputable boy had allowed him peaceably to take his place amongst them. Some of them, it is true, were but little above him in the social scale. Their homes were sufficiently wretched, and they themselves ragged and ill-behaved enough. But none of them were so utterly

forlorn as Tom had been. He was a pariah of the pariahs. No boy in the town was such a combination of rags, wretchedness, and sin, as poor Tom had been. His very name had been a by-word of contempt to many who had themselves very little of which to boast. And now he had committed, in the eyes of these, an unpardonable sin by appearing amongst them with clean hands and face, in a decent suit of clothes, and with an evident desire to turn over a new leaf, and become a well-behaved boy.

The more respectable of Tom's school-fellows kept aloof, and said nothing to him, good or bad. But those who were almost as deeply degraded as he himself had been regarded him from the first with an evil eye, and took every opportunity of venting their ill-feeling upon him. His offence in their eyes was, that he had been lifted by a loving hand from a depth of wretchedness into which even they had been able to look down upon him, and placed upon an elevation from which he might be tempted to look down upon them.

Nothing was farther from the thoughts of poor Tom than to boast of his altered circumstances. He was too painfully conscious of his own ignorance and general insufficiency amongst his schoolfellows to regard any of

them with contempt. And on this account the persecution to which he was incessantly exposed during the first few days of his school life gave him the most bitter grief. For a time, however, he bore it patiently. It was hard to be taunted, and hooted, and hustled, and pinched, and cuffed, and kicked, and to be the victim of numberless spiteful tricks at the hands of boys with whom he was necessitated to spend several hours of every day. No kind of petty persecution is more distressing than that which a community of boys are able, and sometimes disposed, to inflict upon one of their number. A boy's spirit has before now been cowed and crushed, and a boy's life made well-nigh as wretched as it is possible for human life to be, by such a course of daily annoyance and persecution at the hands of his companions as poor Tom suffered at this time from the malice of his school-fellows.

But, hard as this persecution was to bear, Tom tried with all his might to endure it patiently ; and for a time he succeeded. A few weeks ago one tenth part of the annoyance of which he was now daily the passive victim would have provoked him to fierce retaliation. Not a taunt which he now received with meekness but he would then have re-

turned with blows. Not an indignity or act of violence which was now inflicted on him with impunity but would then have cost its perpetrator dear. What, then, was the secret of Tom's forbearance? It is not difficult to tell. One lesson the poor boy had learned already from his loving benefactress, and that was the lesson of love. She may be said to have taught him the very existence of that gentle emotion, that lovely plant of Paradise. Nay, she had even sown its seeds in the boy's soul, and beneath her kindly nurture the sweet flower itself had sprung up in his hitherto barren heart. That he was beginning to love little Mrs. Briggs there could be no doubt, and that in no common degree. This being the case, the uppermost thought in his mind was that he must do all he could to please her; and, though his ideas were far from clear on the subject, he had a strong persuasion that she would be displeased and grieved if he were to give way to his feelings and fight with his persecutors. To know that he had been fighting would, he thought, bring a shadow upon her face, and, perhaps, the tears into her eyes; and he could not bear to think of the pained tone in which she would ask him what he had been doing, if he were to go home from school with the tell-tale

traces of an encounter on his face and clothes.

Thus poor Tom held out for a time. But there came a day when his patience failed at last, and when even his love for her who had been to him more than a mother did not prevent his retaliation upon his persecutors—when, to his partially awakened conscience, retaliation seemed even to be demanded by that very love itself.

All the disrespect and violence offered to himself only he had borne with the utmost patience. Every form of persecution which schoolboy ingenuity could devise he had endured with the resignation of a martyr. He had even suffered himself to be called a ‘gaol-bird’ and a ‘thief,’ and betrayed no sign of anger save a slight quivering of the lip. But, when the malice of his persecutors passed on from himself and assailed his good little benefactress, poor Tom’s pent-up indignation burst forth like a mountain torrent.

One day a boy, rather bigger than Tom himself, and almost as ragged as he had previously been, said some disrespectful, jeering words of Mrs. Briggs. The boy, who had discovered, as it was not difficult to do, that Tom revered and loved the good little woman, chose this as the most effectual method of

wounding his feelings. The shaft was well aimed, and struck deep. But the result was such as the youthful tormentor had not been led by the previous bearing of his victim to anticipate.

‘If you say that again,’ said Tom, his black eyes flashing fire, and his clenched fist already raised, ‘I’ll knock you down.’

The boy, though somewhat taken aback, repeated his former words, which were scarcely out of his mouth when a blow from Tom’s vigorous and practised fist brought him to the ground. More astonished still, he was up again in a moment, and rushed upon his assailant with great rage. And then, in the midst of a quickly gathered crowd of their schoolfellows, who urged them on with excited cries, the two boys fought furiously. How long the encounter would have continued, and with what result, it is impossible to tell; but it was cut short by the ringing of the bell for afternoon school. The fight had left traces on the countenances of Tom and his antagonist which quickly attracted the attention of the master. The two boys were accordingly called out from their places, questioned, and caned, by far the heavier share of the castigation falling upon poor Tom, who had given the first blow in the fight, and whose previous

history had prejudiced him in the eyes of the master no less than in those of the boys.

This unfair treatment added the last drop to the poor lad's cup of bitterness. Boiling over with shame and indignation, he rushed from the school, and, before the master could recover from his astonishment, was half way to the house of little Mrs. Briggs, which he was now beginning to look upon as his home.

Tom felt no inclination this time to shun the presence of his little benefactress. He was beginning to know how much she was his friend. He could not think she would blame him for what he had done ; for had he not fought for her sake ? And he felt sure she would cheer and comfort him.

Mrs. Gubbins stood plaiting at her door, as Tom, with blood upon his face, a swollen and discoloured eye, hair flying in the wind—for in his haste he had forgotten his cap—and clothes disarranged and torn, came panting up. The wise gossip paused in her work, and regarded him with a knowing and rather complacent look.

'Just as I expected,' she said, half aloud. 'The little varmint !'

But Tom, having neither eyes nor ears for Mrs. Gubbins, burst in at Mrs. Briggs's door,

and, rushing up to the little woman herself, who was sitting quietly sewing in her chair, threw his arms about her neck, and, burying his blood-stained and aching face in her bosom, burst into a paroxysm of grief.



CHAPTER.VI

A LESSON IN LOVE.

WITH painful misgiving Mrs. Briggs gently raised Tom's head, and looked with much tenderness into his face.

'Why, Tom, Tom!' she exclaimed, gently chiding him; 'what's this?'

'Please, mum, I couldn't help it, mum.' And Tom's tears and sobs burst forth afresh.

'Couldn't help it, Tom!' cried Mrs. Briggs in astonishment.

'Couldn't help what, my boy? Why, you must have been fighting. But there, there, don't cry. I'm not angry with you, Tom. Come now, dry your



eyes, and let us wash your face, and then you shall tell me all about it.'

Somewhat reassured by these kind words, Tom became more composed; and, when the traces of his conflict had been removed from his face, as far as this could be accomplished by means of warm water and a soft sponge gently applied by the hand of little Mrs. Briggs, the poor lad told his benefactress, in his own fashion, the story of his trouble.

'I shouldn't ha' done it, mum, if he hadn't ha' said wot he did.'

'Who, Tom?' inquired Mrs. Briggs.

'Why, him, mum, Bill Smithers, him as I wopped.'

'And what *did* he say, Tom?'

'Well, you see, mum, him and some o' the t'other uns hev said and done a sight o' orkard things to me since I went to school; and I've bin a good bit riled at times. But I stood it all quiet like; for, you see, mum, I thought as you'd be wery sorry if I was to get a-fightin'. So I let 'em jaw me, and wot not, and never said nothink.'

'That was very good of you, Tom,' interposed Mrs. Briggs; 'but what was it that provoked you so much to-day?'

'Ah, that's just where it is, you see, mum.

I could ha' stood anything as they'd done to *me*, 'cause, you see, I'm used to it.'

'Then you've been standing up for some other boy, have you, Tom?' put in Mrs. Briggs again. 'That was very brave of you, but you shouldn't fight if you can help it.'

'No, mum,' said Tom quickly, 'that ain't it nuther. It was *you* as he was a-talking about.'

'Me!' cried little Mrs. Briggs.

'Yes, mum, that it wur. I could bear all as they said about me; but when that 'ere chap began to talk disrespectful o' you, mum, I couldn't do with that, so I let out at him and hit him atween the eyes and knocked him over, and then he got up and comed at me, and we pitched in like mad. And then the master, mum, he wopped us, and laid on to me most, and said I were the wust, 'cause I begun it, and then I runned away and comed here, and that's all on it.'

Mrs. Briggs was deeply touched by this mark of Tom's affection, and secretly not a little proud of his championship; and she felt it to be a very difficult and delicate matter to censure him even in the mildest manner for what he had done. She drew Tom to

her side, and, kissing his forehead, chid him very, very gently.

‘Warn’t it right, mum?’ asked Tom in surprise. ‘Didn’t I had to oughter ha’ done it?’

‘Well, Tom,’ said Mrs. Briggs, ‘you know it’s wrong to fight; and you mustn’t take any notice of what the boys say in future, even about me. I don’t mind it, Tom; it won’t hurt me, you know. I’m delighted that you love me so much, my boy, and that you should have borne so many things rather than do what you thought would grieve me. It would have grieved me, Tom, and it does grieve me now to think that you should have been led into this. But don’t cry, Tom,’ she added hastily, as Tom’s face darkened. ‘I’m not angry with you; I’m not, indeed. That would be very wrong and ungrateful of me when you meant so well. I’m only grieved, Tom. I know you thought you were doing right, and it was very loving of you; but don’t fight again, Tom, even for my sake.’

‘Well, mum,’ said Tom, ‘I won’t — not if I can help it. But I reckon,’ he added with a shrewd smile, ‘as some on ’em ’ull let me alone arter this.’

That evening, while Tom was sitting at the table with his book, Mrs. Briggs slipped out

and made her way to the house of the school-master. She found that worthy man in a state of great anger against Tom, and strongly inclined to refuse him re-admittance to the school. But he was not proof against the little woman's pleading. And he saw, when she had laid the real facts of the case before him, that the boy had not been nearly so much to blame as he had at first supposed. He accordingly consented to receive Tom back again, and give him another trial.

Mrs. Briggs was overjoyed, and hastened home with a beaming face.

'It's all right, Tom,' she said in a cheerful tone, as she entered the house, where Tom still sat at his book, 'I've seen the master, and you're to go back to-morrow morning, as though nothing had happened.'

As Tom looked up, a momentary shade crossed his brow. But the next instant he answered quietly and even cheerfully, 'All right, mum, I'll go.'

'And now, Tom,' said Mrs. Briggs, sitting down in her chair, and drawing the boy to her side, 'I want to talk to you a bit.'

'Yes, mum,' said Tom, fixing his black eyes questioningly upon her.

'You've been fighting for my sake to-day, Tom.'

Tom hung his head. 'Yes, mum,' he said in a crestfallen tone, 'I knows I has; but I ain't a-goin' to do it no more.'

'Well, well,' said the little woman in a soothing tone, 'I'm not going to scold you, my boy; but I want to talk to you about it. Do you love me so very much, Tom, that you are so ready to fight for me?'

'Yes, mum,' said Tom, brightening, but with some surprise, 'in course I does. I don't know,' he added in a thoughtful tone, 'as I ever loved anybody afore, but I *does* love you, mum.'

'Very much indeed, Tom?'

'Yes, mum, that I does—more nor I can tell.'

'Well, now, Tom,' queried little Mrs. Briggs, looking earnestly into his face, '*why* do you love me?'

'My eye!' exclaimed Tom, with the greatest astonishment; 'that is a good un, that is!'

'Well, but tell me, Tom.'

'Why, don't you know, mum?' asked Tom, in wonder.

'Never mind whether I know or not,' replied Mrs. Briggs. 'I want you to tell me.'

'Well, mum, look at these 'ere clothes,'

said Tom, pointing to the comfortable and tidy garments in which he was clothed. 'Where did I get 'em from? Why, you give 'em to me, mum, 'stead o' the rags as I had on afore. And then I'm never hungry now, 'stead o' being always hungry as I used to be. And that's your doin' too, mum. And then, ain't this 'ere house my home, acause you says, says you, "Come to me, my poor boy, and live in my house, and I'll be a mother to you, and take care on you," and that like? And ain't you done everythink for me? And bean't you allus a-thinkin' o' some'at to do me good? And,' he added in a subdued tone, 'ain't you told me about God, and taught me how to pray? There, mum, now you knows why I loves you.'

'Yes, Tom,' said Mrs. Briggs, kissing his forehead and smoothing his hair with her hands, 'I thought so. You love me because of what I have done for you. Well, do you know, my boy, there's Some One Who has done more for you than I have.'

'That there ain't,' said Tom impulsively. 'There ain't nobody in all the world as never done nothink to help me afore,' he continued, with a vehement redundancy of negatives, 'nor never give me a kind word.'

'No, no, Tom, I know that, my poor boy ;

but you don't understand me. I mean Some One up above.'

'O, I see,' said Tom ; 'it's God as you mean, mum. Yes, I s'pose He have done a good bit for me at times.'

'Of course He has, Tom. Why, He's done everything for you.'

'Very like, mum,' was Tom's reply. 'But then, you see, I don't know Him like I does you, and it's kind o' different.'

'Yes, Tom, that's true. But I want you to think of God as your best Friend, and to love Him for the same reason as you love me. It's quite true, Tom, that He's done far more for you than I have. He gave you your life, and takes care of you every day, and helps us to get food and clothes and all the things we want. And He put it into my heart to do all this that I'm trying to do for you, and into my power, too. And then, you know, He sent His Son to die for us and save us from our sins and from hell. And now, don't you think that, if you love me for what little I have done for you, you ought to love God too, Who has done so much more?'

For a few moments Tom was thoughtful and silent.

'Yes, mum,' he said at length. 'I s'pose I

ought to love God. It's very kind on Him, to be sure, to take so much care on me, and all that. But then, I can't make myself love Him, can I, mum ?'

'No, Tom,' said little Mrs. Briggs gently. 'But I should think there would be no need for that. I can't help loving God, just as you can't help loving me, you know. Don't you remember that was just what you said yourself the other day, when we were talking about Jesus and His dying for us ?'

'Yes,' said Tom, 'I see. I wish,' he added, 'as I was like you, mum. I wish I couldn't help loving God. I s'pose,' he continued, with a sigh, 'it's because I ain't good enough.'

'That need not prevent your loving God, Tom dear,' said little Mrs. Briggs.

The next morning Tom went cheerfully to school, as though nothing unusual had happened.

'You'll be a good boy, won't you, Tom ?' said Mrs. Briggs, as she kissed him when he was starting.

'I'm a-goin' to try, mum,' was the cheerful response.

'And you won't fight any more, Tom, will you ?'

'No, mum,' said Tom, with some hesitation.

'Leastways,' he continued, 'that is—not if— But there, mum, I *won't* fight, seein' as how you doesn't want me to.'

'That's right, Tom! Never mind what they say, even about me. I don't mind, you know. And then, Tom, you remember, Some One else will be pleased with you.'

'Yes, mum, I knows,' said Tom, glancing upwards.

Mrs. Gubbins was looking out of her window as Tom started for school.

'Well, I never!' she exclaimed, as she saw him run off, clean, neat, and cheerful. 'If he ain't a-going to school again!'

There were greater surprises in store for Mrs. Gubbins yet. This boy, this Tom Stokes, who came of such 'a bad lot,' was about to falsify all her gloomy and uncharitable prognostications.

At school Tom was peaceably received. He knew now that he had done wrong in fighting. But he was glad to notice signs of amity on the part of some of his former enemies, which had doubtless resulted from the spirit he had yesterday displayed. And the peaceable demeanour manifested now by all his schoolfellows gave him the assurance that the necessity for fighting with any of them would not be likely again to arise. Tom

could not help being very much cheered by this altered state of things. And the master, too, said nothing about his running away on the previous day, and showed him much greater kindness than he had hitherto done. So that, altogether, Tom began to be very happy at school, and tried harder than ever to learn his lessons and be a good boy. Nor did he forget to ask for the help of God; for the simple teaching of little Mrs. Briggs had taken a strong hold of his young and hitherto untutored heart.

The next few weeks passed very quietly with Mrs. Briggs and her young charge. She paid her weekly visits to the neighbouring markets; and, on the intervening days, prosecuted her business at home, and performed with quiet and cheerful diligence her humble domestic duties. But she was not too busy to give a great deal of earnest attention to Tom. Morning and night the old Bible was opened, and the good little woman read some of its blessed words with her grateful and now eagerly interested pupil. Often, in the evenings, she talked to him of God and the Saviour, and did her best to answer his shrewd and puzzling questions. Night by night, too, she questioned Tom as to his lessons during the day; and it would

be hard to say whether he took more delight in telling, or she in hearing, of the progress he had made. But the happiest moment for them both was when Mrs. Briggs sat with the Bible open on the table before her, and Tom, standing by her side, spelt out a few of its sacred words himself. Or it was, perhaps, an equally joyous occasion when the poor boy was able to copy out—in irregular and most eccentric letters, it is true, but still legibly—a short text which she had written on his slate. The words of the text were, ‘God is love;’ and Tom had no difficulty in committing them to memory.

Still the earnest, patient little woman had her discouragements. It must not be supposed that Tom broke completely loose from all his old bad habits at once. This could not, in the nature of things, be expected. The poor boy had fully resolved to amend his life, and honestly tried to do so. But old habits are strong, and accustomed words and phrases would come to his lips, although poor Tom was ready to pluck out his tongue the moment he had uttered them. Many times he struggled bravely, and it was only in a few instances that he gave way. Once or twice he used bad words; and on one occasion, to the inexpressible grief of his

good little benefactress, he told her a lie. She wept and prayed with him at these times, and talked to him very seriously, but with much tenderness. As for Tom himself, he was quite as much distressed by his faults as was Mrs. Briggs. He listened broken-hearted to her prayers and loving reproaches. He told her how hard his struggle was to do right; and protested, with many tears and with earnest simplicity, that he would not give way again.

‘It’s the devil, Tom, who tempts you,’ said Mrs. Briggs, ‘and you can’t resist him in your own strength, you know. You must ask the Lord to give you a new heart, and to help you by His Spirit to do right in spite of all the temptations of the devil.’

Tom promised that he would, and the good little woman’s words were not lost upon him.

Mrs. Briggs also taught Tom David’s prayer: ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me;’ and from that time it formed part of his regular morning and evening prayer.

After this Tom told no more lies, nor did Mrs. Briggs ever again hear a bad word from his lips.

Indeed, Tom was now making rapid im-

provement in all respects. It was clear that he was becoming a changed boy. His intellect was expanding, and he was fast emerging from the dense ignorance in which he had hitherto lived into the light of knowledge. That his soul also was unfolding to a still holier light there could be no doubt. That the boy was truly penitent, in as far as he could understand that he was a sinner in the sight of God, became more evident every day. Nor was he devoid of a not unintelligent faith in the Saviour. One thought, at least, had taken full possession of his mind. It will be best expressed in his own words.

'Seein' as how,' he said, 'Jesus hev a-died for me, I feels as if I must love Him somehow. On'y somehow 'r other I can't make myself love Him.' And then, after a pause, 'But there, it'll may be come if I pray to God.'

Of Tom's after life we cannot speak, for it is yet to be. The events we have recorded took place not many months ago. The earth has not once revolved around the sun since Tom Stokes was the neglected outcast of Pincher's Court, and he is still with little Mrs. Briggs. But we are sure that his future is full of hope. If ever there was a brand plucked from the burning, Tom Stokes is

that brand. And if ever gratitude to God has held possession of a human heart, it fills that of little Mrs. Briggs when she recalls the moment when she first thought of stretching forth her hand, for Christ's sake, to rescue poor Tom Stokes from a life of ignorance and sin. And surely, if to any one, then to this devoted little woman will the Master say at last: 'Inasmuch as thou hast done it unto one of the least of these, thou hast done it unto Me.'



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